

THE MYSTICISM OF MARGERY KEMPE

James P. Kelleher

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Boston University



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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

THE MYSTICISM OF MARGERY KEMPE

by

James Patrick Kelleher
(A.B., Sacred Heart College, 1933)
submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1948

EFFICIENT BOND

CONTINUED

A. R. & R. CO.

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Thesis

THE MYSTIC OF LANCET 1911

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1938

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by

First Reader

Winifred H. Loveland
Professor of English

Second Reader

Donald J. Winslow
Professor of English

THE AUTHOR.

Approved

by

First Reader
Professor of English

Second Reader
Professor of English

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The finding of "The Book":

Prior to 1935, little was known of "The Book of Margery Kempe" except that it had once existed. Devotional extracts of this were published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501 in a seven-page quarto, and since he termed her an anchorite, it was assumed that the lost work was a book of religious meditation. In 1521 these extracts were reissued by Henry Pepwell as the third paper in a little quarto volume comprising seven English mystical productions and printed as "The Cell of Self-Knowledge", which was reprinted with revised and orthographically modernized text by Edmund Gardner in 1910. The introduction has this interesting comment: "The revelations show that she was (or had been) a woman of some wealth and social position, who had abandoned the world to become an anchoress ..." (p.XX) But in 1935 Lieutenant Colonel Butler-Bowdon of Pleasington Old Hall, Lancashire, England, brought a manuscript to an expert for identification that was revealed as a complete copy of the missing fifteenth century work. It had been lying unnoticed in the library of Pleasington Old Hall. How it came to be there is a matter of conjecture. The writing was originally owned by the Carthusian monastery of Mount Grace, and it is not unlikely that, when the monks were driven out by the soldiers of Henry VIII, they

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entrusted some of their books to the contemporary Butler of Pleasington Old Hall for safekeeping.

Its Importance:

This discovery enriches the world of English Literature with a unique work. Margery Kempe reveals herself as anything but an anchorite, and her writing, although it does have several chapters of undiluted religious matter, is largely autobiographical, covering a period of her life that extends from her marriage at the age of twenty to shortly after her last journey when she was over sixty, or from about 1393 to 1433. The importance of the work is seen when we understand that it is a pioneer work in English prose and in the field of biography. In fact, it is the earliest original English prose of considerable length - on record. A "Life of Wulfstan"¹ is the only English biography that antedates it and this is a translation from the earlier Latin. And in the field of biography it is a remarkable work - of the vivid confessional type - that stands out sharply in a sea of mediocre, stilted, moral-reforming works. It was written when the House of Lancaster held the throne, but we shall find nothing remotely comparable to it until we reach the middle of the Tudor period some four generations later. Additional importance is given it from the light it throws on the fifteenth century. Margery is not interested, seemingly, in the great happenings of her

1. "Life of Wulfstan" - by William of Malmesbury

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for the extraordinarily intimate and lively description of people and circumstances to be found in her reminiscences. The Old Eve, restless and self-assured and opinionated, dies hard in her, and she reacts violently to everything that befalls her. She gives us a variety of information about life in Lynn, and she goes on to tell us about her experiences on her endless pilgrimages, at first all over England, and then by land and sea across the whole of Europe and as far as the Holy Land. We even have a little glimpse of Norway.

Finally, there is the value that attaches to the fact that this is the book of a self-proclaimed mystic with a mission to mankind. Countless passages attest this. "So many hundred thousand souls shall be saved at thy prayers"; she will

1. Atlantic Monthly 164: 232-40, Ag. '39

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have a "seat in heaven at the Son's knee"; "She is a holy pearl and pillar of the Church", and a mirror of the sorrow people should have for their sins. She could give the graces of the Holy Places, and whoever should invoke her to the end of the world would receive his boon or a better thing.

It is this mystic angle to Margery's life that poses our problem. I believe it is true that the average reader will be only mildly interested in the light she shines on the fifteenth century, but he will be extremely curious about her personal claims and her reputed experiences in the mystical field - for that, after all, is the heart of her book. And the scholar too must solve the problem of Margery's mystic claims before he can be fully assured of her authority and her limitations so far as his field is concerned. The question, therefore, arises - and it is a very knotty and acute one - was she a genuine mystic?

Diversity of opinion:

Contemporary opinion is about as equally undecided on this question now as in Margery's time, to judge from her own reports. Since the discovery of "The Book of Margery Kempe" in 1935, there have been numerous book reviews, of course, as well as several magazine articles and a short book. The writers have varied widely in their opinions. The Christian Century reviewer (Gretchen Gaul) speaks of her as "egotistic" and "providing no spiritual sustenance for moderns".¹ Leonard Bacon in the Yesterday Review of Literature has "sympathy with such genuine tribulation of spirit".²

1. Christian Century 62:17 Ja. 3 '46

2. Yester. R. Lit. 57:122, 4 '44

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Her claims puzzle reader:

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1. Christian Century 62:17 Ja. 3 '45

2. Sat. R. Lit. 27:12N.4 '44

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1. Christian Century 62:17 Jan. 3 '45
2. Sat. R. Lit. 27:128.4 '44

She was a "warm-hearted determined woman" according to the Weekly Book Review (Clare Godfrey).³ She was definitely a "psychopath" in the opinion of H.C. White.⁴ An article in the Nineteenth Century alludes to her "sensuous type of mysticism"⁵ while Miss Emily Hope Allen in the introduction to the version of the book of Margery by the Old English Text Society speaks somewhat vaguely of her as a "minor mystic" - perhaps for terms of classification - and calls her "petty, neurotic, vain, illiterate, physically and nervously overstrained; devout, much traveled, forceful and talented."⁶ Miss Katherine Cholmeley, in the one book on Margery, is almost unrestrained in her praise; the title of her book is indicative: "Margery Kempe, Genius and Mystic".

Procedure:

It should be clear, then, that a study of this question would be well worth while, and would clarify Margery's status and help fix her position for the student of biography and literature as well as explain her to the ordinary reader. But the problem is not an easy one. We are separated from Margery by a period of five hundred years and there is danger of our projecting twentieth century notions into the totally

3. Weekly Book Review p.6 015 '44

4. Commonweal 39: 164 - 6 D.3

5. 19th Century 132: 30-2 J1.'42

6. "The Book of Margery Kempe", Early English text society, p.lxi

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 neurotic, vain, illiterate, physically and nervously over-
 sensitive; devout, much troubled, forceful and talented."⁴
 Miss Katherine Thoburn, in the one book on Margery, is
 almost unqualified in her praise; the title of her book is
 indicative: "Margery Kempe, Genius and Mystic".

Conclusion:

It should be clear, then, that a study of this question
 would be well worth while, and would clarify Margery's status
 and help fix her position for the student of biography and
 literature as well as explain her to the ordinary reader. But
 the problem is not an easy one. We are separated from Margery
 by a period of five hundred years and there is danger of our
 projecting twentieth century notions into the totally

3. Weekly Book Review p. 8 115 144
4. Commonwealth 194: 104 - 5 113
5. 19th Century 132: 30-2 11, 142
6. "The Book of Margery Kempe", Early English Text Society, 1911

EMERSONY BOND
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different atmosphere of her age. And undoubtedly, the question of her mysticism could be better treated if we had Margery herself under observation and could subject her to physical and mental examination, get her case history, use diagnostic procedure, summon contemporary witnesses, sift the testimony and verify charges. Unfortunately, we must work almost wholly on the testimony of Margery herself as found in her book and, from the very nature of things, that is suspect. "Nemo iudex in sua causa", the Latin proverb says aptly. What we can do, and what we must do, is to examine Margery's career as told in her own words - her life and its wealth of marvels - in the light of inherent probability, and in accordance with the facts we are given by authorities in the fields of mysticism and also of mental disorders, for if she shows signs of madness, it would confirm a negative verdict on her mysticism. We can, moreover, investigate the amount of influence Margery was subjected to mystically and examine her originality. This would weigh appreciably in the final judgment, for if Margery is but an echo she must inevitably sink back into the shadow of her sources. But before we can proceed with this study of Margery, we must first assemble the main facts of her life and examine the background of the age in so far as it tends to shed light upon her career.

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CHAPTER III

SKETCH OF MARGERY'S LIFE

Early circumstances:

Margery Kempe, nee Burnham, was born about 1373 in the town of King's Lynn, Norfolk, England. She is not concerned about giving us any dates except for the writing of her book, but from the clues dropped that tie up with other historical events, Miss Emily Hope Allen has constructed a chronological table that will be found with the more critical version of the Old English Text Society. The town of Lynn was at that time one of the most important markets in England, and Margery's father belonged to the circle of leading burgesses. She tells us that he had been mayor several times and alderman of the High Guild of the Trinity and, undoubtedly, his prestige was to aid her when she was later haled before magistrates and churchmen. At the age of twenty she married John Kempe whom she considered somewhat beneath her in station, and very frankly she told him so on at least one occasion when he remonstrated with her on the subject of her showy dress. There were fourteen children of this marriage, as she herself tells us, but beyond that affirmation there is surprisingly little mention of them. Only one is mentioned in any detail - a son - and that mainly in connection with her last pilgrimage, a journey into Germany when she was about sixty.

1. "The Book of Margery Kempe", p. 2. Future unqualified references in the text are to this.

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Madness and cure:

After the birth of her first child Margery became dangerously ill and sent for her confessor. There was a sin she had concealed in confession a long time and even now found difficult to mention though she wanted to be well shriven in preparation for death. The priest was rather harsh and, exhausted physically and spiritually as she was, her mind became deranged. For eight months she was tormented by diabolical visions and temptations to suicide. Then one evening she had a vision of Jesus Christ, Who came to her bed and said, "Daughter, why has thou forsaken Me, and I forsook never thee?"¹ She grew better at once, but for many years she still lived in worldly fashion. Then followed the failure of several ventures in business which she looked upon as God's plan to cure her of love of gain. And one night as she lay beside her husband, she heard "a sound of melody so sweet and delectable that she thought she had been in Paradise." And she lamented: "Alas, that ever I did sin! It is full merry in heaven." (p.5)

Subsequent behavior:

She now began to lecture friends and neighbors on the joys of heaven. Her neighbors defended themselves from her new enthusiasm with a shrewd thrust that reveals one of the beauties of Margery's book. In a few words she can give a complete character description and the spirit of the age. The

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passage between her and her neighbors is one such cameo portrait.

And they that knew her behavior beforetime, she and now heard her speaking so much of the bliss of heaven, said to her:-

'Why speak ye so of the mirth that is in heaven? Ye know it not, and ye have not been there, any more than we.' (pp.5,6)

She was now seized with violent longings to be freed from her wifely duties to her husband, and she prevailed upon him finally to give up his marriage rights and let all her thought be of prayer, penance, and pilgrimage. She began to have visions of Our Lord and the saints and to enjoy "high contemplation". Her behavior was remarkable in that she insisted on wearing the white clothes of a maiden in obedience, she claimed, to a revelation. Also she was overcome by frenzied sobbing, twisting, and shouting during church services. This made some scorn and revile her while others looked upon her as a saint. It was the time of the Lollard heresy and Margery was tried before several church tribunals for suspected heresy but was acquitted. She made pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem, Spain, numerous spots in England, and in her old age to Germany in connection with the companioning of a daughter-in-law to her homeland. With her account of her return home from this journey, her autobiography comes to an end. Of her last days and death we know nothing. Perhaps she did become an anchorite. De Worde seems to have thought so in 1501.

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anchorite. De Worde seems to have thought so in 1501.

Her book:

There are a few interesting facts about the actual writing of the book. It was done at the bidding of Our Lord, she claims, and towards the close of her life, though friends among the clergy had offered to take down her revelations earlier. But it was not the will of Our Lord. Finally, when the right time came, she did dictate (she could neither read nor write) her experiences to a priest who was not a native Englishman, however, and wrote a horrible script that strangely, however, "though he wrote it not clearly nor opening to our manner of speaking, he, in his manner of writing and spelling made a true sense." (p.199) It was so undecipherable that it could not be read except by much prayer. She appealed to a priest to take the work of the first amanuensis and rewrite it. He promised, indeed, but turned the work over to another, and then, remorseful, took up the work once more after four years and could read it well enough, with Margery's prompting, to transcribe it for her, and add a new section. There are two books, therefore, not one. According to the chronology deduced by Miss Allen, the first copy that was neither good English nor "Dewch", as Margery put it, was finished in 1432 and recopied in 1436. The supplement was begun in 1438.¹

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CHAPTER IV

THE BACKGROUND OF HER BOOK

Unrest and revolt:

It may be well here to give some of the background of the 15th century so far as it concerns Margery Kempe. There was, first of all, a spirit of unrest in the air and a tendency to challenge authority and tradition. The Black Death, the mysterious plague that swept through England in 1348, striking suddenly, doing terrible damage and departing as swiftly and mysteriously, had wiped out half the population, it is estimated. This had wide repercussions. The emancipation of the serfs, that had been proceeding apace, was vastly accelerated. The dearth of laborers gave them great bargaining power and led them to travel to localities where conditions and masters were most favorable. The king and nobles attempted to slow up the economic emancipation in order to safeguard their traditional privileges and check a growing boldness on the part of the lower classes. The "Peasants' Revolt" of 1381 was the result. It was put down, but it only slowed up and did not check completely the processes that were eliminating serfdom in England. It helps explain the spirit of unrest that was in the air in Margery's England, the spirit of growing independence on the part of the lower classes, and the prevalence of wandering. These things are seen in the background of her book.

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Luxury:

It was a period of comparative luxury in many respects with a consequent dislike of discipline and penitential living generally that, by resistance, developed also some penitential souls and mystics. The growth of commerce and manufacture together with the large booty captured in the French wars had brought increased wealth to England. The simple scale of living yielded to a desire for sumptuous fare and gaudy attire. The literature of the period is full of references to the expensive tastes which were found in every class of society. We have evidences of this showy extravagance in the life of Margery Kempe herself soon after her recovery from her sickness.

When this creature had thus graciously come again to her mind, she thought that she was bound to God and that she would be His servant. Nevertheless, she would not leave her pride or her pompous array, which she had used before time, either for her husband, or for any other man's counsel. Yet she knew full well that men said of her full much villainy, for she wore gold pipes 1 on her head and her hoods, with the tippets, were slashed. Her cloaks also were slashed and laid with diverse colours between the slashes, so that they should be the more staring to men's sight, and herself the more worshipped. (p.3)

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Some corrupt clergymen;

Undoubtedly there was corruption among the churchmen. There were many good priests, monks, friars, and bishops -- that is clearly evidenced in "The Book of Margery Kempe" -- but there were enough exceptions to breed scepticism, disobedience to authority, and seriously scandalize the faithful. The Church was being harmed most -- as always -- by its own children, and by those whose station demanded a better life and example. The Latin proverb was verified that puts it succinctly, "Omne Malum et bonum e clero". The words of G. G. Coulton, though they refer to Chaucer's time (1340-1400), are still applicable to Margery's. He is speaking of St. Francis' hope that his founding of the Friars would completely reform Church evils.

The failure of the friars became a theme of common talk, as soon as enough time had gone by for the world to realize that Francis and Domenic had but done what man can do, and that there was as yet no visibly new heaven or new earth. Wyclif himself scarcely inveighed more strongly against many of the worst abuses in the Church than Bonaventura a century before him -- Bonaventura, the canonized saint and Minister General of the Franciscans, who as a boy had actually seen the founder face to face. 1

Many of the clergy are ignorant, quarrelsome, idle, and unchaste. The anti-Lollard articles presented to the king by the University of Oxford in 1414 speak of the "undisciplined and unlearned crowd which daily pressed to take sacred orders",

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and of the scandalous ease with which "illiterate, silly and ignorant" candidates, even if rejected by English authorities, could get ordination abroad. 1 The English Church had never recovered from the loss of trained, learned and virtuous clergy suffered in the Black Death. Mediocre material thronged to take their place, not to serve the Church or their fellow men, but themselves.

The large majority were excluded from almost all intellectual enjoyments by their imperfect education and the scarcity of books. The regular and healthy home life, which has kept so many an idle man straight in the world, was denied to these men who were professionally pledged to live as the angels of God, while they stood exposed to every worldly temptation. 2

Monks and Friars:

There is frequent reference to monks and friars by Margery, and it is well to understand to whom she refers. They differed, be it understood, from the parish priests who ministered to the faithful of a locality.

The monks owed their character principally to the founding genius of St. Benedict (543) who organized hermits into a community directed by a superior and pledged to the practice of the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in a monastery (stability). Katherine Cholmeley has a passage that describes them well:

1. Ibid.
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Upon the monastic houses, if not upon the whole of medieval culture, was the impress of St. Benedict. He had really created the religious community: the men who were dedicated to God, not only through prayer, meditation, and work, like the hermits and monks of Egypt and Ireland, but through obedience. It was by the bright sword of obedience that they went forth to conquer sin. Prayer at the regular canonical hours was the Opus Dei; labour of the hands was prayer also. Study, especially of the Scriptures and the Fathers, centred the intellect upon God. By tilling of the wasteland Europe was, in a dual sense, cultivated during the disruption of the warring Dark Ages: by study and teaching learning was kept alive; and a garner of the classics was preserved for the reading of future generations. 1

St. Francis had an entirely different idea for the friars. They were to mix among the people, living on alms (mendicants), and were to preach the love of Christ by their words and show forth His poverty by their life. The usual theme of the friars was the manhood that Christ made His own through Mary, and His bitter passion and death. These men were divided into the four great mendicant orders: the Franciscans, founded in 1209, called the Friars Minor or Grey Friars; the Dominicans (1215) also called the Black Friars; the Carmelites (1245) who were named the White Friars; and, finally, the Augustinians who claimed origin from St. Augustine (1430) and were termed the Austen Friars.

1. Margery Kempe: Genius and Mystic", p. 15

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Pilgrimages:

A word on pilgrimages is necessary since they played so important a part in Margery's career. In earlier ages a pilgrimage was a serious matter involving great labor and heavy privation with risk to life and limb. We can see something of that in Margery Kempe (p. 212) when she describes her terror of the waves (she sat in the bottom of the boat with a shawl over her head), her fear of robbers and also of being violated. A sentence or two illustrates this:

The Friars said they would do as well as God would give them grace and comforted her according to his power but said that he would not abide in that town that night for he knew well they were a perilous people. Then they went forth together out of the town again in the evening with great dread and sadness, mourning by the way where they should have harboured that night...the said creature saw a heap of bracken in a house, and with great insistence she purchased grace to rest herself on the bracken that night. The friar, with great prayer, was laid in a barn, and they thought that they were well eased that they had the house over them.And at nights had she the most dread. Often times and per-adventure, it was of her ghostly enemy, for she was ever afraid of being ravished or defiled. (P.220)

But there was also a large element of pleasure in these pilgrimages that was becoming increasingly more stressed. They were becoming journeys of pleasure more than of duty. The medieval man and woman were not used to modern luxuries and consequently were not over impressed by the hardships that went with the taking of scrip and staff. The inns were not luxurious but they offered good cheer and good fellowship to all who could pay the price. A pilgrimage

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to our Lady's Shrine at Walsingham or to St. Thomas a Becket's at Canterbury meant a change of routine, pleasant gossip -- and a pleasant feeling of piety. These pilgrimages were popular. There were seventy places of pilgrimage in Norfolk alone. 1 The most popular foreign pilgrimages were to the Holy Places in Palestine, to Rome, and to the shrine of St. James at Compostella in Spain. Now Margery, undoubtedly, must have been trying to such jolly pilgrims with her distinctive white dress, sermonizing and loud weeping. But we must say in her defense that she probably had great occasion for rebuke in their unpilgrim-like conduct. Berthold of Regensburg, one of the greatest mission preachers of the thirteenth century, roundly scolded such irregularities, and in scolding described them for us.

Many a man journeys hence to St. James of Compostella, and never hears a single mass on the way out or back, and they go with sport and laughter, and some seldom say even their Pater-Noster. 2 . Again :- (we note the time element) Thou mayest earn more reward at one mass than another man in his six weeks out to St. Jacob and six weeks back again: That makes twelve weeks. ... Ye run to St. James, and sell so much at home that sometimes your wives and children must ever be the poorer for it, or thou thyself in need and debt all thy life long. Such a man crams himself so that he comes back fatter than he went, and has much to say of what he has seen, and lets no man listen to the service or the sermon in the Church. 3

1. Cutts, "Middle Ages", P. 162
2. Coulton, P. 140 , 141.
3. Ibid.

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 in need and debt all thy life long. Such a
 man craves himself so that he comes back
 fatter than he went, and has much to say of
 what he has seen, and lets no man listen to
 the service or the sermon in the Church. S

1. Cutts, "Waldie Ages", p. 103
 2. Goulton, "p. 100, 101.
 3. 101b.

(Margery, we remember, incurred debt through pilgrimages)
 We have another witness in the Lollard Thorpe who was
 tried before Archbishop Arundel (whom we know from
 Margery) and painted pilgrimages much in those same colours.

Such fond people waste blamefully God's
 goods on their vain pilgrimages, spending
 their goods upon vicious hostelries, which
 are oft unclean women of their bodies...
 Also, sir, I knowe well that when divers
 men and women will goe thus after their owne
 willes, and finding out one pilgrimage, they
 will ordaine with them before to have with
 them bagge pipes; so that everie towne that
 they come through, what with the noise of their
 singing and with the sound of their piping,
 and with the jangling of their Canterburie
 bells, and with the barking of dogges after
 them, that they make more noise, than if the
 king came there away, with all his clarions
 and many other minstrels. 1

The Lollard Thorpe would be against all pilgrimages in
 any case, but there must have been some element of truth
 in the picture he drew for us. These were some of the
 sights Margery might have observed and they would have
 been painful to a truly religious soul. Margery's
 reproaches are understandable -- and also the reaction
 to them of such people.

The Lollards:

The spirit of discredit of tradition and authority
 that obtained politically also had its repercussions in
 the religious world. The long war between France and
 England had done much to develop the evil spirit of

disorder and produce an overmighty, greedy and anti-clerical nobility. They had some justification since reform was needed among the clergy and, unfortunately, was slow in coming. The French Avignon popes of the period had little influence in England, and then came the Great Schism, and the sacredness of authority in general was weakened. The spirit of attachment to the ruler of Christendom was inevitably shaken at sight of rival claimants to the papal throne. It is natural to expect an attack on dogmatic authority and the sacramental system of the Church. John Wyclif spearheaded this attack. He was the ally of anti-clerical and anti-papal nobility, especially of John of Gaunt. He taught that the Temporal Lords could take the goods of an undeserving clergy, while he attacked the retaliatory power of excommunication. In general, he attacked popes, friars, pilgrimages, and the power of absolution; but the typical characteristic of Wyclif and his ministers, called Lollards, whom he sent forth to preach, was an attack on the Eucharist and, more particularly, on Transubstantiation. The usual test for heresy, therefore, was a question whether the suspect believed that the substance of bread remained after the consecration. The teaching of the Church was (and is) that the substance of bread becomes the substance of the Body of Christ after consecration and the substance of wine becomes His Blood.

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We may note here that this was one of the leading questions put to Margery. Her answer - that she believed all the Holy Church taught - exempts her of the charge of heresy. In addition, she made a very clear statement of two Lollard beliefs -- that the substance of bread remained after consecration and that unworthy ministers could not validly administer the sacraments -- and clearly rejected both. (P. 109)

Then she said:- 'Sirs, I believe in the sacrament of the altar in this wise; that whatever man hath taken the order of priesthood, be he ever so vicious a man in his living, if say duly those words over the bread, that our Lord Jesus Christ said when He Made His Maundy among his disciples, where He sat at the Supper, I believe that it His very Flesh and Blood, and no material bread; and never may it be unsaid, be it once said.' (P. 102)

This is enough to show clearly that Margery was no Lollard, but her insistence on speaking of religious things caused her to be confused with the Lollard preachers. Her talk, however unlike theirs, was ascetical and not doctrinal in character, as would appear from her defense. (P. 113) On one occasion she was attacked as the daughter of Sir John Oldcastle, who was a Lollard leader during the reign of Henry V. He was more commonly known as Lord Cobham, from his marriage to a Cobham heiress. After organizing a rising in 1414 outside London he was captured and executed in 1417.

This, then, was the religious background of the age in which Margery lived. It helps to throw some light upon her,

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for it is against this background that we must take Margery's stature. There is little purely secular in her writings; however, she is ~~nothing~~ if not a religious figure. No matter how we may eventually judge her, her operation is in the religious field and her autobiography purports to be the story of a soul on its way to God.

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CHAPTER V

MARGERY'S MYSTIC CLAIMS

Her claim:

We may now begin to investigate Margery's claims of mysticism. This will necessarily involve a preliminary discussion of mysticism itself, its definition and nature, its ordinary manifestations and also its counterfeits, but first let us understand clearly that Margery definitely affirms her right to the title of mystic and is not content to be conceded an ordinary position in the spiritual world. She will not suffer herself to be dismissed as a run-of-the-mill devout soul, and any such cavalier treatment of her claims would only lead us into error when we come to weigh all the evidence and attempt a final evaluation of her position. She claims contemplative prayer; she lays claim to experiences that are reserved to genuine mystics; she talks of visions, revelations, and promises that are clearly extraordinary. I stress once more that this is very significant so far as we are concerned. It means that for us -- on the basis of these claims -- there are only three possible judgments left open: that she is a genuine mystic and can claim kinship to such chosen souls as St. Bridget, St. Catherine, and St. John of the Cross; or she is falsely asserting mystic experiences which would present her in the light of a religious hypocrite, a pseudo-saint; or she is deluded partially or entirely in her

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claims, which could only be true in the supposition of some form of madness. A quotation will make clear her claims.

What we have to say on the second two possibilities will, it is clear, tend to corroborate our verdict on her mystic claims. If she were proved mad, or a hypocrite, it would confirm the impossibility of any mystic claims.

On one occasion Margery tells us, while she was praying, Our Lord, "Ravished her spirit and said unto her:

Daughter, why weepest thou so sore? I am coming to thee, Jesus Christ Who died on the cross, suffering bitter pains and passions for thee. I, the same God, forgive thee thy sins to the uttermost point, and thou shalt never come to Hell or Purgatory, but when thou shalt pass out of this world, within a twinkling of an eye, thou shalt have the bliss of Heaven, for I am the same God that hath brought thy sins to thy mind and made thee to be shriven thereof. And I grant thee contrition to thy life's end. Therefore, I bid thee and command thee, boldly call me "Jesus Christ, thy love," for I am thy love, and shall be thy love without end. And, daughter, thou has a hair-cloth on thy back. I will that thou put it away, and I shall give thee a hair-cloth in thy heart that shall please Me much better than all the hair-cloths in the world. Also, My dear worthy daughter, thou must forsake that which thou lovest best in this world, and that is the eating of flesh. Instead of that flesh, thou shalt eat of My flesh and blood, that is the very Body of Christ in the Sacrament of the altar. This is My will, daughter, that thou receive My Body every Sunday, and I shall flow so much grace into thee that all the world shall marvel thereof. Thou shalt be eaten and gnawed by the people of the world as any rate gnaweth stockfish. Dread thee naught, daughter, for thou shalt have victory over all thy

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enemies. I shall give thee grace enough to answer every clerk in the love of God. I swear to thee by My Majesty that I will never forsake thee in weel or in woe. I shall help thee and keep thee so that no devil in hell shall part thee from Me, nor angel in heaven, nor man on earth, for devils in Hell may not, and angels in Heaven will not, and man on earth shall not. And, daughter, I will thou leave thy bidding of many beads, and think such thoughts as I shall put into thy mind. I shall give thee leave to pray till six of the clock, saying what thou wilt. Thou shalt thou be still and speak to me in thought, and I shall give to thee high meditation and very contemplation. (p.10)

This passage alone will suffice to show why we insist that Margery cannot be dismissed as an ordinary devout soul. (And similar passages are innumerable throughout the book.) The following points stand out:

1. She has communion with God, and whether it was an external or internal vision matters not. (this point will be taken up later.) It is not given to ordinary souls.
2. She is assured, not only of forgiveness of her sins, but of the punishment deserved for them, which would ordinarily entail suffering in Purgatory (unless expiated or remitted here on earth).
3. She can call Christ by a special title, "Jesus Christ, thy love".
4. She is to enjoy the privilege of communicating

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sacramentally every week. This was an extraordinary privilege reserved to very holy people in those ages.

5. The world is to marvel at the graces she will receive.

6. Although she will have many enemies, she will enjoy a very special protection of God that will enable her to triumph over all enemies, whether on earth or in Hell.

7. She is to enjoy "high meditation and very contemplation" - high forms of prayer that mark the mystic.

8. She will have contrition to her life's end and enjoy heaven immediately after. This refers to the grace of final perseverance, something truly extraordinary. It is heretical to claim this without a special revelation on the matter, and it is remarkably uncommon that it should be given.

This shows very clearly that Margery is asserting her extraordinary claims and privileges that put her in the front rank of mystics. But this is not all. God wishes her to wear white clothes, the mark of maidenhood, that set her apart from ordinary wives. She has numerous revelations and visions, and tears of compunction and devotion that, she is told, are "the highest and surest gifts that I give on earth". (p.23) Her prayers prevented the robbing of her companions, and brought safety to them (pp.52,64); she receives absolution from St. John the Evangelist (p.69) many thousands will be saved through her (p.170), and she knew and foretold the

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future (pp. 32, 37, 43). There is another grace also, truly extraordinary, and worth quoting in full.

Daughter, I promise thee the same grace that I promised St. Catherine, St. Margaret, St. Barbara, and St. Paul, in so much that what creature on earth unto the Day of Doom asketh thee any boon and believeth that God loveth thee, he shall have his boon or else a better thing. Therefore, they that believeth that God loveth thee, they shall be blessed without end. The souls in Purgatory shall rejoice in thy coming home, for they know well that God loveth thee specially. And men on earth shall rejoice in God for thee, for He shall work much grace for thee, and make all the world to know that God loveth thee. Thou hast been despised for my love and therefore thou shalt be worshipped for My love.

Daughter, when thou art in heaven, thou shalt be able to ask what thou wilt, and I will grant thee all thy desire. I have told thee before time that thou art a singular lover and therefore thou shalt have a singular love in Heaven, a singular reward, and a singular worship. (p.42)

Claims "Spiritual Marriage":

There is a final clinching argument for Margery's having claimed mysticism in its highest states. She claims that she enjoyed the phenomenon known as the "Spiritual Marriage", which is, according to St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, the last and most perfect degree of spiritual union.¹ We purpose now to explain what this marriage is and afterwards show clearly that Margery claimed to enjoy it. It is important. Anyone laying claim to the "Spiritual Marriage" explicitly lays claim to

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mysticism. We must investigate the term first of all.

It is difficult to find terms and comparisons to express the spiritual reality of the soul's close union with God. The closest earthly comparison is the union of man and woman in matrimony, and therefore, it was, a priori, to be expected that spiritual writers should draw upon this comparison in their halting attempt to clothe spiritual truths in terms the ordinary mind can grasp. It is also, a priori, to be expected that many of a modern generation, blase and far more experienced in profane rather than divine love, and reared in Freudian concepts uncritically accepted and weakly understood, would lift an eyebrow and speak of eroticism on the part of mystics. That is regrettable but unavoidable, and it is to be expected especially from those who are not well acquainted in hagiography and are brought face to face with these terms in the life of one mystic without being aware of the broad tradition that is behind them. A reference to this term by Msgr. Farges may help to clarify it further.¹

In order to understand it, let us first remember that God, Who in the Holy Scriptures is called Creator, Lord and Master, Shepherd, Physician, Father and Friend, seems to prefer to all these titles that of Spouse of our souls because it expresses more vividly His tenderness and the sacred union which His grace wills to establish between Himself and the faithful soul.

1. "Mystical Phenomena", Msgr. Albert Farges, pp. 174, 175

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1. "Mystical phenomena", Magr. Albert Farago, pp. 144, 145

However strange such expressions as spouse, bride, and marriage may appear to men who are still worldly and carnal, lacking in the sense of spiritual things and ignorant of the language of divine love, they are so often and boldly employed by our sacred Books, so inseparable from Catholic dogma and theology, that we may not pass them by unnoticed nor suppress them, without deeply mutilating the Christian religion itself.

Msgr. Farges goes on to remind us that such terms were used by Our Lord, St. Paul, the writers of the Apocalypse and the Canticle of Canticles, and by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church through the ages. So much for the term "Spiritual Marriage" and kindred expressions. Needless to say, Margery uses these expressions often. As for the reality itself, Msgr. Farges, relying on the words of numerous mystics, defines it:

It is an experimental knowledge, and a profound and permanent consciousness, not only of the presence of God in the soul, but also of His most intimate, familiar, and indissoluble union therewith.¹ Experimental knowledge is common to all mystic union with God. That which constitutes the specific character of spiritual marriage is at the same time the perfectness of the intimacy of this union, in a greater light unmixed with darkness, its indissoluble character, and also the stability or permanence of the consciousness of it in the soul.² And it is this stage, as Msgr. Farges puts it, that "crowns and completes on earth the mystical ascension of the soul in the Christian life."³

1. "Mystical Phenomena", p. 176

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

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- 1. "Mystical Phenomena", p. 156
- 2. Ibid.
- 3. Ibid.

It is interesting and useful here to describe from the life of a saint the vision called the "Betrothal" that is the preliminary to the "Spiritual Marriage" and resembles it very closely in most details. One is the pledge of divine marriage; the other is the fulfillment of that pledge.

On the 9th of April, 1542, being Easter Day, says her biographer, Catherine, finding herself in her cell towards the early morning, Jesus Christ appeared to her clothed in glory, carrying a resplendent cross on His shoulder, and wearing a magnificent crown on His Head, accompanied by the glorious Virgin Mary, His Mother, St. Mary Magdalen, St. Thomas Aquinas, and another blessed one of her order. Her cell was immediately filled with a blinding light, and a multitude of angels, gracefully arrayed, were drawn up in order in the air, bearing in their hands various musical instruments. At the sight of so much majesty, Catherine was filled with a great fear, and having fulfilled the prescriptions of obedience, prostrated herself three times on the ground in adoration of Jesus. Then the most holy Mother of God begged her divine Son to be pleased to take Catherine for His bride. Jesus readily consented, and while the Blessed Virgin presented Him with the hand of His humble betrothed, He drew from His own ring-finger a shining ring, which He Himself placed on the first finger of the left hand of Catherine, saying to her, 'My daughter, receive this ring as a pledge and testimony that thou art mine and wilt be mine forever.' And when Catherine desired to declare to Him her gratitude, finding no words adequate to the favor she had just received, the angels suddenly began to draw so sweet a melody from their instruments that it seemed her cell had become a Paradise. Jesus then exhorted her to practise humility, obedience, and all Christian virtues;

It is interesting and useful here to describe from the life of a saint the vision called the "Baptismal" that is the preliminary to the "Spiritual Marriage" and resembles it very closely in most details. One is the pledge of divine marriage; the other is the fulfillment of that pledge.

On the 28th of April, 1843, being Easter Day, says her biographer, Catherine, finding herself in her cell towards the early morning, Jesus Christ appeared to her clothed in glory, carrying a resplendent cross on His shoulder, and wearing a magnificent crown on His head, accompanied by the glorious Virgin Mary, His Mother, St. Mary Magdalen, St. Thomas Aquinas, and another blessed one of her order. Her cell was immediately filled with a blinding light, and a multitude of angels, graciously arrayed, were drawn up in order in the air, bearing in their hands various musical instruments. At the sight of so much majesty, Catherine was filled with a great fear, and having fulfilled the prescriptions of obedience, prostrated herself three times on the ground in adoration of Jesus. Then the most holy Mother of God begged her divine Son to be pleased to take Catherine for His bride. Jesus readily consented, and while the Blessed Virgin presented Him with the hand of His humble betrothed, He drew from His own ring-finger a shining ring, which He himself placed on the first finger of the left hand of Catherine, saying to her, 'My daughter, receive this ring as a pledge and testimony that thou art mine and wilt be mine forever.' And when Catherine desired to declare to Him her gratitude, finding no words adequate to the favor she had just received, the angels suddenly began to draw so sweet a melody from their instruments that it seemed her cell had become a Paradise. Jesus then exhorted her to practise humility, obedience, and all Christian virtues;

and after having made her taste some of the pure and ravishing joys of the mind which he reserves for His beloved spouses, He disappeared with all His company.¹

Sometimes it is the Divine Child who appears in the "Betrothal" that is preliminary to the "Spiritual Marriage" (e.g. in the case of St. Catherine of Bologna, St. Rose of Lima, and others). Some times the vision is sensible. But a purely intellectual vision without images suffices according to St. Teresa. The ceremony of the ring is usually found; it may be omitted, however, when it is the Christ-Child Who appears.

We may turn now to the account of Margery Kempe where she files her claim to this same mystic phenomenon. Her experience took place in the Church of the Apostles in Rome on St. John Lateran's Day. The Father of heaven^{spoke} to her:

Also the Father said to this creature: Daughter, I will have thee wedded to My Godhead because I shall shew thee My secrets and My counsels, for thou shalt live with Me without end. (p.74)

And then the Father took her by the hand (ghostly) in her soul, before the Son and the Holy Ghost; and the Mother of Jesus and all the twelve Apostles and Saint Katherine and Saint Margaret and many other saints and holy virgins with a great multitude of angels, saying to her soul:

'I take thee, Margery, for My wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, so that thou be

1. "Mystical Phenomena", p.178

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'I take thee, Margery, for My wedded
wife, for father, for lover, for
richer, for poorer, so that thou be

kindly and gentle to do as I
 bid thee for, daughter, there
 was never a child so gracious
 to its mother as I shall be to
 thee, both in weel and in woe,
 to help thee and comfort thee.
 And thereto I make thee surety.' (p.75)

This passage, in conjunction with what we know of the "Spiritual Marriage" from the lives of the mystics, is conclusive. The details are similar; the words of the Father are explicit. Margery, therefore, is laying claim here to the highest mystical union and, because of that, she can never be cited merely as an ordinarily pious soul. Without further ado, and without the slightest danger of exaggeration, we can say that by virtue of her own words she must rank with the greatest saints and most highly privileged souls. Ordinary, Margery was not, though this is the treatment given to her by many reviewers. Whatever other category she may fit into, this at least is unsuitable. She thrust herself stridently upon the notice of the 15th century with her claim to high mysticism, and in her "Book" she continues to do the same today.

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CHAPTER VI

A STUDY OF MYSTICISM

Presuppositions noted:

In order to judge of Margery's claims, we must examine the nature of mysticism and correlate our findings with the facts given in her "Book". But let us note, first of all, that we make no pretense of presenting a apologetic treatise on this subject. If someone denies the existence of God or a spiritual soul, or the possibility of God's communication with it, then for him there can be no such thing as genuine mysticism at all, and he will find nothing in these pages to refute his views. He could make an "a priori" condemnation of Margery without need of any testimony at all. The verdict would be that she was deluded if not wilfully deceiving. For such a person we should first have to establish the religious foundations with such proofs as are to be found in the "Summa theologica" of St. Thomas and his "Summa contra Gentiles". And even preliminary to that we might caution him with the words of William James who says, with regard to the mystics' claims:

It must always remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be superior points of view, windows through which the minds look out upon a more extensive and inclusive world.¹

But all this is beyond the scope of our treatment, and we are entitled to prescind from such a position. But, granted these things, we shall still have to consider the nature of mysticism

1. William James, "Varieties of Religious Experience", p.428

and its findings and the light it sheds upon Margery. We shall have occasion to quote from two works recognized as authoritative in this field, "Western Mysticism" by Dom Cuthbert Butler, and "Mystical Phenomena" by Msgr. Albert Farges.¹ In addition we shall have occasion to refer to "The Spiritual Life" by Adolphe Tanquerey, which is used as a text-book in many seminaries. (This latter has an excellent bibliography that treats of the different schools of mysticism chronologically from earliest times to the present.)

Loose definitions:

In the prologue to his "Western Mysticism", Abbot Butler gives a useful introduction to this subject.

There is probably no more misused word in these our days than "mysticism". It has come to be applied to many things of many kinds: to theosophy, and Christian Science; to spiritualism and clairvoyance; to demonology and witchcraft, to occultism and magic; to weird physical experiences, if only they have some religious color; to revelations and visions; to otherworldliness or even mere dreaminess and impracticability in the affairs of life; to poetry and painting and music of which the motif is unobvious and vague. It has been identified with the attitude of the religious mind that cares not for dogma or doctrine, for church or sacraments; it has been identified also with a certain outlook on the world - a seeing God in nature, and recognizing that the material creation in various ways symbolizes spiritual realities; a

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1. "Western Mysticism", Dom Cuthbert Butler
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a beautiful and true conception, and one that was dear to St. Francis of Assisi, but which is not mysticism according to its historical meaning. And, on the other side, the meaning of the term has been watered down: it has been said that the love of God is mysticism, or that mysticism is only the Christian life lived on a high level; or that it is Roman Catholic piety in extreme form.

Against all this stands the perfectly clear, traditional, historical meaning, handed down in the Christian church throughout the centuries, not subject to confusion of thought until recent times.

Synonymous with passive contemplation:

Here it is necessary to explain that in the Latin Church the word used was not "mysticism" but "contemplation". The word "mysticism" was originally used in connection with the Greek mysteries, as the Eleusinian. The Christian use of the word is due to the writer now known as pseudo-Dionysius, probably of the fifth century, who gave the title "Mystical Theology" to the little treatise that was the first formulation of a doctrine on the subject. Though this treatise was at an early date translated into Latin and became well known in the West, the old word "contemplation" held its ground so that "mystical" did not become current until the later Middle Ages, and "mysticism" is a quite modern word. Consequently, "contemplation" is the word that will be met with in St. Augustine, St. Gregory, and St. Bernard, to designate what is now commonly called "the mystical experience". (Margery, we note, refers to

1. St. Augustine
 2. Fr. A.B.
 3. Ibid., p.
 4. Evelyn Underhill, "Mysticism", p. 97
 5. Hastings's "Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics", II, 63
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"high meditation and very contemplation", and not to mysticism.)

The claim consistently and unequivocally made by a whole line of great mystics found, perhaps, its simplest and most arresting expression in these words of St. Augustine: 'My mind in the flash of a trembling glance came to Absolute Being, That Which Is'.¹ This claim, as uttered by Augustine, has been recognized as the claim of the mystics, and has been formulated by recent writers of various schools of thought in such ways as these:

A (conscious) direct contact of the soul with Transcendental Reality (God).²

A direct and objective intellectual intuition of Transcendental Reality.³

The establishing conscious relation with the Absolute.⁴

The soul's possible union in this life with Absolute Reality.⁵

Abbot Butler's book gives direct quotations from the important mystics in illustration of this claim. I am inserting one citation, both as illustration, and because the treatise from which it is taken was known to Margery Kempe.

For at the first time when thou dost (this work), thou findest but a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. This darkness and this cloud is, howsoever thou dost, betwixt thee and thy God, and telleth thee that thou mayest not see Him

1. St. Augustine, "Confessions" VII, 23
2. Fr. A.B. Sharpe, "Mysticism", p. 74
3. Ibid., p. 96
4. Evelyn Underhill, "Mysticism", p. 97
5. Hasting's "Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics", IX, 83
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clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel Him in sweetness of love in thine affection. And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after Him that thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt feel Him or see Him, as it may be here, it behoveth always to be in this cloud in this darkness. And if thou wilt busily travail as I bid thee, I trust in His mercy that thou shalt come thereto.

Then will he sometimes peradventure send out a beam of ghostly light, piercing this cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and Him; and shew thee some of His privy, the which man may not, nor cannot speak. Then shalt thou feel thine affection inflamed with the fire of His love, far morethan I can tell thee, or may or will at this time. For of that work that falleth only to God, dare I not to take upon me to speak with my blabbering fleshly tongue: and shortly to say, although I durst I would do not.¹ The writer of this anonymous English treatise of the 14th century is evidently speaking of a mystic darkness and of momentary mystic contact with God through it. The whole passage ties in well with similar utterances of St. John of the Cross and of St. Teresa. St. John of the Cross, e.g., terms this "Cloud of Unknowing" the "Dark Night of the Soul" and the "beam of light" is for him the "touch of knowledge and of sweetness" or, plainly, a "certain contact of the soul with Divinity".²

1. "The Cloud of Unknowing", cc. 3, 26 (Italics mine)
2. St. John of the Cross, "Dark Night of the Soul", ii. c.23

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1. "The Cloud of Unknowing", cc. 3, 36 (Italics mine).
2. St. John of the Cross, "Dark Night of the Soul", li. c. 23.

Not asceticism:

Mysticism must not be confused with asceticism; it is far removed from it. Msgr. Farges stresses this, and it is important here since we are emphasizing that Margery Kempe was not merely a pious soul, or ascetic, striving for perfection, but that she laid claims to genuine mysticism - something far different. Says Msgr. Farges:¹

In fact this confusion has not always been avoided by most eminent Catholic writers, such as Pere Gratry and many others. It has even ended by finding a place in the ordinary language of literature. Every impulse towards a perfect life or an ideal is imputed to mysticism; even more, all piety, every religious sentiment, is labelled mystic, so that the word is made to embrace every manifestation of Christian, or even simply religious, life. Yet nothing is more inexact, as we shall see.

The "Three Ways":

To make this clearer, let us recall to our minds the classical idea of the Three Ways.² The religious soul, in its ascent towards God, begins by freeing itself from the bonds of sin and evil habit. During this struggle, usually painful and laborious, the predominating virtue, that which has the greatest force, is the fear of God and his judgments, "the beginning if wisdom", as says the Psalmist: initium sapientiae timor Domini. This first preparatory phase of the Christian life has been called the way of purification, or purgative way.³

1. Msgr. Farges, "Mystical Phenomena", pp. 5/6
2. These pertain to asceticism, but are a preparation for at least active contemplation
3. cf. also "The Spiritual Life" by Tanqueray, p.300 seq.

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3. cf. also "The Spiritual Life" by Tardieu, p. 200 seq.

The second begins when the soul, being freer from the trammels of sense and concupiscence, endeavors to obtain a better understanding of revealed truths and to make them enter into its life by the positive practice of the virtues, thus reflecting in its conduct the light of faith. Whence the name illuminative way given to this period, in which the dominant note is no longer fear, but a more or less selfish love of God, Christian hope.

Finally, in the third period, the pure love of God opens for the soul the vast field of the perfect life, known as the unitive way. To please God - this is the habitual yearning of such a soul. All other selfish motives are effaced, or at least subordinated to this one desire. Although the soul has not yet achieved union with eternal blessedness, and is still far short of so doing, nevertheless this stage is like a far-off foretaste thereof; it is a final stage, a stage of relative repose on this earth, and thus we may finally call it the unitive and perfect life.

This distinction between the three states or ways, corresponding with the outset, the progress, and the achievement of spiritual life, must not be taken in too absolute a sense. Doubtless there is no hard-and-fast boundary, which would exclude all hope from fear or all love from hope. Nor, indeed, is any state so perfect that no return of temptation or struggle is absolutely assured. It is enough for these three states to be thus distinguished by their dominant note, and such, in this sense, is the teaching of theologians, be they Thomists, Suarezians, or Scotists.¹ Moreover, Innocent XI, in 1687, condemned as

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Four kinds of prayer:

To these three stages on the path of holiness correspond four degrees of prayer, oral, mental, affective, and prayer of simple regard. The prayer of the beginner is at first oral. He spends the period of prayer in reciting prayers from some book. From this he passes on to mental prayer or meditation. The mind, in meditation, reflects upon the different truths of religion, passing from one truth to another, for instance, that God is creator, has absolute rights over his creatures, that sin violates these rights, and this necessitates forgiveness and atonement. In the course of time, the beginner, by a natural process, more easily perceives the standard truths without discursive reasoning, and his prayer tends to grow affective. The time is passed in making frequent acts of faith, hope, and love, and the other virtues. This corresponds to the illuminative stage. These affective acts tend to become more simple, and gradually the soul is occupied with one act over a longer period of time. We thus come to what is known as the prayer of simple regard, called active or acquired contemplation, when the soul habitually practices this affective lingering on one truth for a longer period of time. This degree of prayer corresponds to the

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unitive way. It is the teaching of theologians that with ordinary grace, any ascetic, if he applies himself, can attain to this acquired or active contemplation, and, as a matter of fact, many devout souls, both those in religion and those active in the world, do attain this degree of prayer.

Bishop Hedley observes:

It is the very aim of the teaching of Father Baker and his school that "extraordinary" prayer (contemplation) should be an ordinary state for Christian souls; for priests, for religious, for devout layfolk, and for the poor and unlearned, who love God with all their heart.¹

Such is the ordinary development of spirituality -- the field of ascetic practice that is the foreground of mysticism. But it is to a higher ground that we must ascend if we are to understand the claims of Margery Kempe and such mystics as Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden. To return to the explanation of Msgr. Farges:

The "unitive way" however, to which reference has just been made, branches off in two different directions, both of which lead the soul towards it ever closer union with God, but by different methods and roads. The one is active, and calls for our efforts at all costs; the other passive, under the hand of God, in a very short moment, and calls only for our consent. The former is the ordinary and longer road, the other, a "short cut". In the one we walk on foot, in the other God bears us on the wings of His Grace, without any merit of our own, other than our readiness to be led.²

1. Bishop Hedley "Prayer and Contemplation" P.12
2. "Mystical Phenomena", P.6

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the field of ascetic practice that is the foreground of mysticism. But it is to a higher ground that we must ascend if we are to understand the claims of Margery Kempe and such mystics as Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden. To return to the explanation of Mary Targues:

The "unitive way" however, to which reference has just been made, branches off in two different directions, both of which lead the soul towards its ever closer union with God, but by different methods and roads. The one is active, and calls for our efforts at all costs; the other passive, under the hand of God, in a very short moment, and calls only for our consent. The former is the ordinary and longer road, the other, a "short cut". In the one we walk on foot, in the other God bears us on the wings of His Grace, without any merit of our own, other than our readiness to be led.²

1. Bishop Hedley "Prayer and Contemplation" p. 12
2. "Mystical Phenomena", p. 6

Passive contemplation exceptional:

St. Theresa used to warn her sisters against thinking that there is but one way of attaining to union and perfection:

As I told you, she said to them, it is important to understand that God does not lead all souls by the same way...thus, because all the nuns in this convent practice prayer, it does not follow that they all must be contemplatives....she who is without it, yet follows the counsels I have given, will attain great perfection. It may be that she will gain far more merit, as she has to work harder on her own account.¹

To return to Msgr. Farges once more:

If the soul follows the ordinary ways of Providence, it remains always active and master of itself; on the other hand, in the extraordinary ways, it becomes at certain moments passive in the hands of the Holy Spirit, who takes possession of it, and suspends its powers more or less, and acts in it and through it. Such, for example, are the mystical phenomena of infused recollection, of the prayer of quiet, full union, ecstasy, raptures, and, so much the more, visions, prophecies, and all the other marvelous happenings which depend in no way upon the will of souls thus favored, but solely upon the good pleasure of God.

If we desire to produce them ourselves, we are not even slightly successful. In the ordinary way, however, the practice of the virtues depends entirely on the personal effort of the Christian, on his merits and prayers, and needs only the cooperation of ordinary divine grace, which is never refused to prayer and merit.

1. "Mystical Phenomena", P.7

St. Teresa "Way of Perfection", Ch.XVII; of. XVIII, XIX, XX.
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For instance, every Christian is able to practice interior acts of penitence, of faith, hope, and charity, or exterior acts of virtue, such as visiting the poor. It will always be possible for him, with good will, to succeed at least a little, and the more generous efforts he makes, the more new graces will he merit for succeeding even better, as St. Thomas says: qui plus conatur, plus habet de gratia. (In Matt. XXV, 15) (This is asceticism.) But the phenomena of quiet, ecstasy, rapture, or even those of vision and prophesy, depend in no way on our personal efforts, nor even on our merits. They are gifts of God entirely gratuitous, because they are necessary, neither to salvation nor to that Christian perfection towards which we ought to strive, and are infused by His grace into certain privileged souls.¹

Not "Quietism":

All the authors of the spiritual life stress the need of the soul's cooperation with grace in the ordinary states of the spiritual life. Different schools may differ in their methods. Benedictines, Jesuits, Franciscans, Redemptorists, etc., proffer different counsels and methods, but all unite in condemning the "Quietism" or passivity of Molinos.¹

Ordinarily the soul is in active cooperation with grace. The idea of working for passivity or the Oriental trance is sternly rejected. But in the very highest stages of prayer there are occasional moments of pure passivity. Msgr. Farges may be again invoked to describe this:

There are, however, exceptional and passive states. But this passiveness, far from being voluntary or arising

1. Note: Michael Molinos (Born 1640, Spain) advocated complete passivity (even the wildest and most evil thoughts should not be resisted).

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from the soul's free choice, must come from the good pleasure of God, who takes hold of the already more or less perfect -- at times of the very imperfect -- to convert them into vessels of election and to fill them with heavenly light and with most marvellous gifts. Here, then, begins the domain of mystical theology. It is from the moment at which there comes into play the grace of God operating alone without our concurrence, when, as St. Theresa says, it is God that does all, that the soul ceases to be completely active and must abandon itself to the guidance of God and to those extraordinary states to which it may please him to raise it; its acquiescence alone is needed.

Here is a comparison which has already been made use of to fix the boundaries of these two domains. The birds which fly through the air that enwraps the earth rise the higher, the more vigorous the beating of their wings. But beyond that stratum of air, and in ethereal space, they are no longer able to make any way, even with redoubled effort. There they find a new and totally different region in which they cannot even breathe or live. God alone can bear them up there: It is useless for them to beat their wings: They must give up the old methods and take to new. Then only is it that one must let God act, and act oneself as little as possible.¹

We have thus arrived at the most advanced stage of the spiritual life, passive contemplation, when the soul's action ceases under overwhelming grace -- and it is only here that we

1. "Mystical Phenomena", P.9

2. Pere Fouleain, "The Graces of Interior Prayer", (P.219 seq.)

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We have thus arrived at the most advanced stage of the
 spiritual life, passive contemplation, when the soul's action
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can properly begin to speak of mysticism. There is a controversy as to whether or not all are called to this "passive" contemplation, and there are two schools of thought on the matter. Pere Poulain has an excellent treatment of the subject.² But we can prescind entirely from this controversy. It suffices for us to know that Margery Kempe claimed to enjoy the very highest form of mysticism, and laid further claim to such experiences as placed her in the category of the very highest mystics, such as St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, St. Catherine of Siena, and St. Bridget of Sweden for she not only makes extraordinary claims but describes a personal experience which she claims to be the "Spiritual Marriage" -- which is the climax of the highest mystic union with God.

Possibility of deception:

We have now considered the nature of mysticism and the express or implied claims of Margery Kempe to be a mystic. It might be well now to consider what authorities in this field have to say about the possibility of deception and to assemble the criteria that will enable us to separate true mystical experiences from false. We can, after that, go on to investigate how Margery is to be classified. Abbot Butler makes a relevant observation:

At the outset it has to be premised
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2. Pere Poulain, "The Graces of Interior Prayer", (P.519 seq.)

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the idea of communion with divinity and the effort to achieve it, and the conviction of the individual that he has achieved it, are common features in religions of all kinds, and are amongst the most universal expressions of the religious consciousness; and especially is ecstasy looked on as a means of effecting union with divinity.

The vast majority of such cases have to be set aside as unreal. Often the means taken to bring about the state of ecstasy and union are altogether repulsive -- magical, orgiastic, immoral; often they are hypnotic. Often a state of religious excitement and exaltation is deliberately produced by physical or psychological methods, or by playing on the religious emotions of a crowd, as in revivals. Of such methods the result is often religious frenzy and abnormal psychical phenomena, akin to hysteria. Within Christianity religious excitement and expectancy frequently produce the feeling of being specially visited by God, by the Holy Ghost, by Jesus Christ. Well authenticated and evidently sincere cases of such convictions fill volumes. (cf. Starbuck, "Psychology of Religion", and James, "Varieties of Religious Experience".) In most cases the experience must be set down as purely subjective, the result of highly wrought religious emotions, nothing more than an excess of sensible devotion. Similarly visions, revelations, locutions, auditions, impulses, movements, experiences, are a field wherein is endless scope for illusion, self-deception, auto-suggestion, as is very well recognized by the most accredited authorities on the spiritual life; concerning a nun who claimed to hear locutions from God, St. John of the Cross said: 'All this that she says: God spoke to me; I spoke to God; seems nonsense. -- Such a one has only been speaking to herself.' (after the Letters, and Ascent, ii.29) Bodily conditions, indistinguishable on the

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physical side from ecstasy and rapture, but without any religious content can be produced by hypnotism or may be the results of hysteria or neurasthenia or other morbid, pathological conditions.¹ History also records cases of diabolical possession and the resultant phenomena, produced through his agency, imitated genuine mystical experiences.²

Msgr. Farges warns that there are two extremes to be guarded against. There are those who, without any investigation whatever, cry out a priori that the miraculous -- and much mystical phenomena therefore -- is impossible -- and the other group: "diametrically opposed to such prejudiced unbelievers are to be found those over credulous folk who are inclined to see the devil everywhere, or the "finger of God" in all extraordinary events."³ St. Francis De Sales has an interesting anecdote:

I recollect, he says, speaking with two nuns belonging to two thoroughly reformed Orders, one of whom, through reading the works of the blessed Teresa, had learnt to speak so much like her that you might have thought her a little Mother Teresa herself; and she believed it, picturing in herself all that St. Teresa had done during life, to such an extent that she thought she had the same experiences, even to the binding of the soul and the suspension of the powers of which she had read in the saint's writings and of which she spoke quite familiarly.

1. "Western Mysticism", pp.298,299
2. Magdalen of the Cross - Franciscan nun, Cordova, 16th century, confessed giving herself to the devil. (cf. Poulain, "Graces of Interior Prayer", C.XXI, n. 36.)
3. "Mystical Phenomenon", P.319

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3. "Mystical Phenomenon", p. 218

Others there are who, from constantly reading the lives of St. Catherine of Siena or her namesake of Geneva, end in thinking that they are Saint Catherines themselves by imitation.⁴

Again Msgr. Farges says appositely:

There is in this foolish infatuation of so many rash and curious minds, not only a danger of turning the heads of the less balanced, but moreover a real peril to Christian faith, lest through ignorance or malice, the truly supernatural come to be confounded with the simply marvelous.⁵

4. St. Francis de Sales, "Spiritual Conferences", No. 9
5. "Mystical Phenomena", P.14

Others there are who, from constantly reading the lives of St. Gertrude of Avon, or her message of Genes, and in thinking that they are Saint Gertrude themselves by imitation.⁴

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4. St. Francis de Sales, "Spiritual Conference", No. 2
5. "Mystical Phenomena", p. 14

CHAPTER VII

INVESTIGATION OF MARGERY'S CLAIM

With the nature of mysticism described, and the possibility of deception or delusion kept in mind, we ask if Margery was truly a mystic. Now the essential fact of mysticism, as we have seen, is contemplation. In the words of Msgr. Farges again:

Now this essential phenomenon of all mystical life is a most complex phenomenon which is known to theologians by the one word 'contemplation', or the infused prayer of contemplation. Its more adequate and complete formula should be this: The intimate union of the soul with God through infused prayer of contemplation.

It finally comes back to the question of evidence, and we must judge of Margery's reputed 'contemplation' in accordance with the impression it makes of truthfulness, reality, sanity, and religious elevation with an eye to similar states in the lives of the great mystics.

But beside the essential phenomenon there are accidental mystic phenomena that are sometimes present, and that admit of greater investigation. Such are the presence of visions, revelations, ecstasy and miraculous happenings. Msgr. Farges devotes a whole section of his book to these accidental mystical phenomena with their natural and diabolical counterfeits, and gives various criteria for judging them. It is not necessary for us to go into such detail here but we must consider briefly the essential and accidental phenomena in the

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life of Margery Kempe according to the criteria proposed by Msgr. Farges in his authoritative volume.

Her prayer life examined:

As already mentioned, Margery Kempe laid claim to "high meditation and very contemplation". It is true that in her treatment of her customary manner of prayer "over many years" (p.227) she describes what is an invocation to the Holy Ghost, a petition for the gift of tears, and then enumerates both particular people and whole classes for whom she asks blessings. There does not seem to be much of contemplation here -- more of formula prayers that could well fit the state of any pious soul. The content shows devotion and charity; the manner, however, does not necessarily imply contemplation, seems rather to argue against it, since instead of simplicity we have multiplicity. But other chapters that show spiritual communing with Our Lord might well indicate contemplation. There are some passages taken from the chapter on her manner of life that must be quoted here for illustration. She tells us:

And in such manner of visitations and holy contemplations as are before written, much more subtle and high without comparison than be written, the said creature had continued her life, through the preserving of Our Lord, Christ Jesus, more than twenty-five years, when this treatise was written, week by week, and day by day, unless she were occupied with sick folk, or else were prevented by other needful occupations as were necessary unto her, or to her fellow Christians. Then it was withdrawn sometimes for it can be had but in great quiet of soul through long exercise.

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By this manner of speech and diligence she was
made mighty and strong in the love of Our Lord,

and greatly stabilized in her faith and increased in meekness and charity with other good virtues. And she firmly and steadfastly believed that it was God that spake in her soul, and no evil spirit, for in His speech she had most strength and most comfort and the most increase of virtue, blessed be God.

... Our Lord of His high mercy visited her so much and so plenteously with His holy speeches and His holy dalliance that she knew not, many times, how the day went. She supposed, for a time of five hours or six, that it had not been the space of one hour. It was so sweet and so devout that it fared as if she had been in a heaven. She though never long there-of, nor was she ever irked thereof. The time went away, she knew not how, she would rather have served God, if she might have lived so long, a hundred years in this manner of life, than one day as she began first. (p.195)

This would appear to be a description of contemplation. The details are convincing. The time passes without her notice, there is a fixed regard on God in prayer with lack of realization of all that was happening around her. Sometimes the prayer is withdrawn when she cannot enjoy quiet. Obviously, we have merely her affirmation and certain details verified that give probability. But additional signs can be adduced in evidence. In the first place, she seems to have gone through the ordinary stages of the three ways, purgative, illuminative, and unitive, that prepare for a life of contemplation, though that need not follow, as we have observed. After her madness that is related in Chapter One, her actions seem to correspond with those of the beginner in the spiritual

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life.

When this creature had thus graciously come again to her mind, she thought that she was bound to God and that she should be His servant. Nevertheless, she would not leave her pride or her pompous array, which she had used before time, either for her husband, or for any other man's counsel. ... And when her husband spoke to her to leave her pride, she answered shrewdly and shortly ... She had full great envy of her neighbors that they should be as well arrayed as she. ... All her desire was to be worshipped by the people. She would not take heed of any chastisement nor be content with the goods that God had sent her, as her husband was, but ever desired more and more. (p.p.3,4)

She goes on to tell of her pride and covetousness that led her to try brewing on a grand scale and the running of a horse mill. Both ended in complete failure, and she recognized in them a divine rebuke that drew her up short.

Here we have the first hesitant beginnings in the spiritual life. She resolves at emendation of life only to find that "The Spirit is willing but the Flesh is weak." She makes mistakes, only gradually comes to realize her faults and then is penitent for them, is imprudent, and is brought to her senses, "purged", by the disposition of Providence. She then advances a step spiritually.

Then this creature, seeing all these adversities coming on every side, though they were the scourges of Our Lord that would chastise her for her sin.

Then she asked God's mercy, and forsook her pride, her covetousness, and the desire that she had for the worship of the world, and did great bodily penance,

When this creature had thus gradually come again to her mind, she thought that she was bound to God and that she should be His servant. Nevertheless, she would not leave her pride or her pompous array, which she had used before time, either for her husband, or for any other man's counsel. ... And when her husband spoke to her to leave her pride, she answered proudly and shortly ... she had full great envy of her neighbors that they should be as well arrayed as she. ... All her desire was to be worshipped by the people. She would not take heed of any chastisement nor be content with the goods that God had sent her, as her husband was, but ever desired more and more. (p.p.3,4)

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Then she asked God's mercy, and forsook her pride, her covetousness, and the desire that she had for the worship of the world, and did great bodily penance,

and began to enter the way of everlasting life as shall be told hereafter. (p.5)

Her subsequent behavior pattern, lasting three years, as she tells us, would seem to indicate a soul in the last stages of the purgative way being introduced to the illuminative way. There seems to be an increasing detachment from earthly things, and more application of mind to the eternal. We read:

Ever after this inspiration she had in her mind the mirth and melody that was in heaven, so much, that she could not well restrain herself from speaking thereof, for wherever she was in any company she would say often times: 'It is full merry in heaven'. (p.5) The practice of prayer and penance is important in these states. It enters largely into Margery's life at this time. And also after this creature heard this heavenly melody, she did great bodily penance. ... She gave herself up to great fasting and watching; she arose at two or three of the clock, and went to church, and was there at her prayers unto the time of noon and also all the afternoon. ... She got a hair cloth from a kiln, such as men dry malt on, and laid it in her kirtle as secretly and privately as she might so that her husband might not espy it ... Then she had three years of great labor with temptations which she bore as meekly as she could, thanking Our Lord for all His gifts, and was as merry when she was reprov'd, scorned and japed for Our Lord's love, and much more merry than she was before time in the worship of the world. (p.6,7)

This progress in the practice of the virtues of these states lasted three years. In the second year she tells of a serious lapse which can be reconciled, however, with these states of the spiritual life.

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We must understand her psychology at this time. The first two years after her "conversion" had been filled with sensible graces, she tells us. (p.p.7,8) Spiritual writers, e.g., Tanqueray, assure us that this is a quite common procedure in the history of a soul's journey closer to God. God gives at the outset much sensible sweetness to draw the soul to Him, and gives courage for the overcoming of initial difficulties. It is usual, however, for this sweetness to fade as the soul progresses further in spirituality, and there follows aridity and temptations, both as a process of purification and to lead the soul to a purer love - of the God of sweetness rather than of the sweetness of God. Margery, as mentioned before, describes such a period at length. She goes on to relate a special incident of the second year of this three year period of trials. She was tempted by a friend to commit adultery, though it seems he was only curious to get her reaction. The temptation prevailed upon her greatly, and when he did not take advantage of an opportunity she provided, she even went so far, on one occasion, as to solicit him herself. She was rejected, and there followed intense shame, and sorrow that approached despair. She then set to work more humbly.

Nevertheless, she was shriven many times and often, and did whatever penance her confessor would enjoin her to do, and was governed by the rules of the Church. (p.9)

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of, at least, acquired contemplation, which spiritual writers

agree in finding to be the normal crowning of the ascetic life - which is here much in evidence. We have all the stages here outlined, the first tentative steps of a beginner, the struggle against sin, even the imprudent behaviour, presumption on a yet infirm spiritual foundation, with a consequent fall, remorse and renewed effort, the practice of much prayer and penance and positive virtues, in short, all the ear-marks of the purgative and illuminative ways. It would, therefore, be but natural to expect that they flowered into contemplation.

May we, therefore, conclude that Margery was a mystic. Let us recall once more that spiritual authorities would require, in support of this claim, not merely a highly ascetic life or even active - acquired - contemplation, but something higher yet - passive or infused contemplation, which has already been defined and explained. That Margery claimed to have this seems unchallengeable. Nothing else would justify her description of her prayer life, her constant visions, and the "Spiritual Marriage". But we may now affirm, and emphatically, that there is nothing in her autobiography - in the judgment of this writer that would (1) categorically establish her claim, or (2) render it even probable in the sense that constant fear of error would not intrude upon the mind. Those who are impressed by her prayers and striving for virtue cannot establish more than the presence of active contemplation - if that. Her own testimony is suspect and open to contradiction - she cannot be both judge and advocate of her own case. So her

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claim to mysticism is definitely not established, if not patent-ly false. But before we proceed with an effort to demonstrate this, let us note that our concession of active contemplation is not an extraordinary thing. It would not imply continuous enjoyment of this grace. Margery's own words offset that claim. Nor would it hinder the presence of genuine faults and imperfections. It would even allow for extreme eccentricities or even mental aberration if this be established. For the grace of God is not hindered by unconscious failings, or by sickness, mental or physical. The distinction is clear. We can admit piety, or even holiness, subject to proof, while on the other hand, we can disclaim extraordinary sanctity, or the advent of a mystic in the nature of St. Teresa or St. John of the Cross. There is a further obvious advantage in that we need not join the large group - in her day and ours - who call her a religious hypocrite, a fraud, which hardly comports with the flavour of her book, while it also enables us to provide an innocent explanation for much of the extraordinary in her life. While admitting her piety, that is, we can broach the possibility whether Margery was not a somewhat unbalanced personality, influenced overmuch by what she heard of contemporary mystics, and subject to hysteria.

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expressed, our procedure is based on the fact that all the signs that should accompany passive contemplation are not verified in Margery's life. As already mentioned, the essential characteristic of a mystic is infused contemplation, which cannot be established in Margery's case beyond the possibility of a very real doubt. It is, of course, an intrinsic phenomenon and, as such, not subject to external observation. The claim can be quickly made, but the denial is as easily forthcoming. There is a check, however, in that this contemplation must be accompanied by certain "signs" that can be verified, and it is accompanied occasionally by secondary accidental phenomena that are open to observation and verification (visions, revelations, power of miracles), at least to some extent. It is under these two aspects that we can observe the "contemplation" claimed by Margery, and it is here that the difficulties at once begin.

We must, first of all, consider the "signs" that attend upon passive contemplation. These consist in the effects it must show to be genuine. We pass up three transitory effects that are beyond our scope - recollection of soul, an element of wonder, and love. But the more permanent effects summed up by the term "Holiness" are capable of investigation. St. Teresa enumerates a sixfold division: peace of soul, tenderness of conscience, profound humility and obedience, the gift of strength, a hunger and thirst after justice, impatience for the joys of the blessed with increasing contempt for all that is

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worldly. All these must be in attendance if there is to be a verdict of genuine mysticism. Any negative findings would require a verdict of doubt or disbelief. We must, therefore, investigate these things in Margery. But first there is a relevant observation by Msgr. Farges:

Such are the principal effects of sanctity produced in a soul by true mystical contemplation. Their absence is a sure sign of illusion and of false mysticism. If, instead of peace, the so-called contemplative evinces unrest and sadness; instead of tenderness of conscience, becomes unmortified; instead of humility and a yearning for self-concealment, makes a parade of her heavenly favors and desires to exhibit them; instead of heroic strength of soul, shows evidences of feebleness and cowardice; instead of hungering and thirsting after justice, lives a lukewarm life; finally, if, instead of the ardent desire of heaven and impatience for the life of the blessed, he is troubled at the thought of death, it is useless to push inquiry further; useless to pass on to discuss marvellous deeds which he may perform; his illusion, if not his trickery, is sufficiently manifest.

On the contrary, the presence in a contemplative soul of these marks of eminent virtue is a proof, or at least a favourable sign, which will authorize us to examine with care any marvellous phenomena which accompany them.¹

In another passage, Msgr. Farges notes that the higher the mystic union the greater must be the holiness of the soul. It is important enough to quote here:

1. "Mystical Phenomena" - p. 107

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In another passage, Marg. Fargess notes that the higher the mystic union the greater must be the holiness of the soul. It is important enough to quote here:

The essential mark of mystical union, and the only one that cannot be replaced, the absence of which is an unanswerable and decisive proof of illusion, is the spiritual transformation of the soul which believes itself to be thus favored. And this transformation must be the more perfect the higher the extent of the union. All theologians are unanimous on this primary point; the tree is known by its fruits; now fruits of holiness always result from the divine action in the soul. From them we recognize with certainty the hand of God, who alone is able to sanctify, for nature cannot do so, and the devil never desires to.¹

We now ask if Margery's life reveals those virtues that must attend the mystic? It is a disagreeable task to have to pass judgment thus on the moral qualities of anyone at any time. It is rendered more disagreeable here when the subject is five hundred years dead and unable to explain or defend herself, or throw additional clarifying light on actions and motives and attendant circumstances, and all these things might well influence our judgment. But, on the other hand, Margery wrote a book with the intent of influencing people and in it, with that in view, made some extraordinary claims. She has deliberately, therefore, placed herself on trial before the bar of public opinion and must attend its verdict. She has, of her own volition, forfeited any right to the seclusion and privacy she hitherto enjoyed. And her claims, if not

1. "Mystical Phenomena", p. 161

The essential nature of spiritual union, and the only one that cannot be placed, the absence of which is an untranslatable and decisive proof of illusion, is the spiritual union of the soul with the divine. This is the only union that is itself to be attained, and this is the only union that is more perfect than the union of the soul with the divine. All our efforts are unavailing on this primary point; and even in the most advanced stages of spiritual life, the soul is still far from the divine union in the soul. From this we recognize with certainty the hand of God, who alone is able to sanctify, for man cannot do so, and the devil never desires so.

We now ask if history's life reveals those virtues that must exceed the mystic? It is a disconcerting task to have to pass judgment upon the moral qualities of anyone at any time. It is required more dispassionate than when the subject is five hundred years dead and unable to explain or defend himself, or throw additional clarifying light on actions and motives and attendant circumstances, and all these things might well influence our judgment. But, on the other hand, history wrote a book with the intent of influencing people and their lives, and in view of this, it is not surprising that it has deliberately, and often, placed itself in a false position. The bar of public opinion and the sword of the sword, the bar of our own will, forfeited any right to the recognition and privacy the right to enjoy. And yet, if not

justified by objective truth, represent a dangerous attack upon it, with likelihood of discrediting genuine mysticism. So Margery well may be the subject of our twentieth century investigation. Moreover, we hope not to violate the claims of justice and charity intentionally; we shall urge against her only the points that rise unavoidably, and there will be due regard paid to all that can be justly said in her defence; we shall be most careful not to impute bad faith where it is not so patent as to be indisputable.

In the first place, Margery might be challenged on the score of humility. It is impossible to judge the inner motives for her actions, and she can always plead in her defense that these were the object of revelation, and therefore, beyond our criticism. But on the other hand, we can express our conviction that these actions, in many instances, give the spontaneous impression of a character who was greatly influenced by pride, and it seems very improbable that revelation can be made responsible for them. There are several lovely examples of humility, it is true, for instance, when she meekly accepts the bowlful of water hurled at her in spite (this happened not once but often, she tells us), and accepts other indignities and reproaches out of love of the crucified Christ and in reparation for sin, hers and others. But we are left with many other passages hard to explain except as indicative of pride (which may not have been apparent to herself). We have already referred to her extraordinary claims that tend to

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glorify herself. To recall a few: Christ loves her as well as Mary Magdalen; she is a pillar of the Church; she is assured of a high place in heaven long before her death - indeed, Christ will come with saints and apostles for her soul; the devils dread her marvellously; anyone who asks a boon in her name till the end of the world will obtain it; many thousands will be saved through her prayers. She sees the consecrated host "flutter". The point is not so much that we can throw discredit on any single instance, but the whole ensemble gives the impression of exaggeration and a delusion founded on pride. In general, we find her life too full of the petty marvellous that has not sufficient external justification. It has not the sober balance that is so characteristic of the great mystic St. Teresa and the other saints. What are we to think of the humility of a woman, for instance, who, after revealing her sins to a monk (properly putting him in his place for doubting her - her version) then agrees to intercede for him - holy woman - with the assurance, "God shall give you grace for my love". In these instances Margery seems to indicate an exaggerated idea of her own importance, and such an attitude hardly comports with humility.

There seems to be another indication of pride in the quarrel she had with the widow. She told the widow that she had a revelation which ordered the woman to abandon her erstwhile confessor and be shriven by Margery's spiritual guide. The widow was not convinced by a revelation which came to her

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second-hand, nor was her confessor. The widow refused to give credence unless she had the same revelation as "the creature", and ordered Margery, it would seem, off the property. In parting, both seemed to have taken the position, "My confessor is better than yours!" But Margery would have the last word even if not orally. She sought out a master of divinity (for she could not read or write), and had him write a letter for her to the widow that had some very telling clauses, in Margery's opinion.

One clause was that the widow should never have the grace that this creature had. Another was that, though this creature never came into her house, it would please God right well.

Our Lord soon after said to this creature: It were better for her than all this world, if her love were set as thine is, and I bid thee go to her ghostly father and tell him that, as he will not believe thy words, they shall be parted asunder sooner than he thinketh, and they that be not of her counsel shall know it ere he does, whether he will or not. Lo! Daughter, here mayest thou see how hard it is to part a man from his own will.

And all this procedure was fulfilled in truth, as the creature had said, before twelve years after.¹

Then this creature suffered much tribulation and great grief because she said these words, as Our Lord bade her. And ever she increased in the love of God and was more bold than she was before. (p.36)

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1. A rather lengthy forbearance on the part of heaven.

Margery may urge that she was a prophet sent from God to interfere in her neighbor's affairs, but the whole passage shows lack of balance, objectively taken, and has a hair-pulling atmosphere to it. We sympathize with the poor neighbor who must accept God's commands on Margery's say-so. It is well to note, incidentally, this lack of balance just alluded to, which I find very noticeable here and in other sections of the book of Margery Kempe. One searches in vain for anything like it in the lives of great mystics. The Spirit of God does not operate in this manner, we venture to say.

On another occasion Margery feels a divine mission to go to a certain lady who was lately bereaved of her husband. The lady would not accept any heavenly messages unless her confessor was in attendance. When he appeared, all three went into a chapel and then this creature told her:

Madam, Our Lord Jesus Christ bade me
tell you that your husband is in
Purgatory, and that ye shall be saved,
but that it shall be long ere ye come
to Heaven.

And then the lady was displeased, and
said her husband was a good man--she
believed not that he was in Purgatory.
Her ghostly father held with this
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The point was hardly whether the husband might right well
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be in Purgatory. Catholic doctrine teaches that even venial sins unforgiven at death, and the punishment due to all past sin, must be cleared before the soul is admitted to heaven --

and the widow knew that general doctrine. But the point was whether Margery was divinely empowered to say that this particular husband was in such a plight, and why a loving widow was under any obligation to believe her without more ado. Margery declares it to be her duty, but Catholic theological practice does not accept such messengers of God on their own affirmation without testimonial and divine corroboration. Supposing she did not have it, Margery presents the unlovely picture of the meddling busybody who not only assures the sobbing widow that her husband is not in heaven but that she herself (the widow) is a long way from there.

This picture occurs time and again where Margery acts as our Lord's "secretary" and well loved "servant" who is on mission for Him. She is frequently discovered telling people that their friends are in purgatory and that they must act in this or that way to relieve them. (p.37) She knew by revelation that certain souls were to be damned and others saved. It is, a priori, a peculiar thing that scriptures do not reveal for certain the final state of any particular soul, not even of Judas, whereas Margery seems to have had this knowledge to overflowing. And we tremble to think of her now that "ever she increased in the love of God and was more bold than she was before" (p.36) -- as the "secretary" of God telling people unceremoniously that their lot was among the damned. We have no express statement that she did so but the story of her "resistance" to these revelations -- and subsequent temptations

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as "punishment by God" -- would seem to indicate that it was not the mere passive knowledge that caused her "revolt" but the "mission" to communicate it to others. (p. 131 seq.) -- And Margery was quite capable of such boldness -- in the name of God, of course. Incidentally, passages like this do much to explain Margery's unpopularity.

There is also a certain lack of meekness in Margery's actions and words evidenced occasionally and incidentally at the treatment she receives from others, which may be taken as argument that she found humility a difficult virtue. When a rich ship owner would not let her sail in this ship "for he held her no good woman", she answered tartly:

Sir, if he put me out of the ship, my
Lord Jesus shall put you out of Heaven;
for I tell you, sir, Our Lord Jesus
hath no liking for a rich man unless he
is a good man and a meek man.

And so she said many sharp words unto
him without any glossing or flattering.
(p.95)¹

This same sharpness is seen whenever she is hard put to it to defend herself, and here, while we admire the saltiness, we may question the humility. Another example comes immediately to mind. A monk reproached her with having a devil. She answered with a witty and perfect "ad hominem" that he should be able to drive him out. This tart tongue reveals Margery as a rough and ready type of character, far from delicate, who could answer a charge full quickly and well. This is a redoubtable forensic virtue, but we may be forgiven for doubting 1. *Italics mine.*

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that it was a virtue much developed among the mystics.

There is additional doubt cast on her humility in that Margery seems to show traces of vain-glory and a desire to impress people. This would be a negative sign of contemplation and one that was especially soored by St. John of the Cross! Here is one of the outstanding difficulties in the book for one who would defend her claim to mysticism. Margery was anything but a retiring person. Before her conversion, she was admittedly very vain and very eager to impress people, and would not be outdone in finery by her neighbors. (p.3) This was not ordinary female vanity but something extraordinary enough to cause much adverse comment and merit a vain rebuke from her husband. We might say that after her "conversion", her piety seemed to have turned to the type that would still keep her in the public eye. We refer especially to the external features of her piety, her wearing of white clothes and a ring that called attention to a special relationship between her and Jesus Christ, her loud wailing and sobbing, her talk of visions, and her interruption of ordinary conversation with the cry, "It is full merry in Heaven". Such things would cause consternation in our days if displayed on a modern pilgrimage or in a Church service. Undoubtedly, they would seem too external and an effort to gain notoriety.

That these were the external features of Margery's piety cannot be gain-said. Her own testimony is too clear, and the allusions too numerous. That these phenomena were extra-

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ordinary will also be commonly admitted by anyone who has some familiarity with hagiography. There have been saints, it is true, who were extraordinary for one or the other phenomenon (cf. Joseph of Cupertino), but I cannot recollect anyone who presents such an ensemble of the marvellous with regard to characteristics so strongly calculated to impress people and gather an audience.

Easily the most outstanding of the external characteristics of Margery was her "gift of tears". Countless references are made to it as something really extraordinary and exciting much comment. It was not merely that Margery Kempe wept intensely on many occasions but it was a violent, noisy weeping -- shrieking is perhaps a better name for it -- and it was not only uncontrollable but combined with convulsive writhing on the ground. Her screaming during contemplation began at Mount Calvary during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and it lasted a good ten years. It is worth describing:

The aforesaid creature wept and sobbed as plentifully as though she had seen Our Lord with her bodily eye, suffering his passions at the time. Before her in her soul she saw him verily by contemplation, and that caused her to have compassion. And when they came up on to the Mount of Calvary, she fell down because she could not stand or kneel, and rolled and wrested with her body, spreading her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would burst asunder; for, in the city of her soul, she saw verily and clearly how Our Lord was crucified. And she had such great compassion and such great pain at seeing Our Lord's pain that she could not keep herself from

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crying and roaring though she should have died for it. And this was the first cry (scil. scream)¹ that ever she cried in any contemplation. And the manner of crying endured many years after this time, for aught any man might do, and therefore, suffered she much despite and much reproof. (p.57)

She goes on to add other details. Her crying was so loud that it caused great wonderment where she was not known, and eventually, much annoyance to many who thought her a religious hypocrite. It is very interesting to note the occasion. She cries thus at the mention of Christ's Passion, the sight of a cross, or a man with a wound or a beast, or if a man beat a child or a beast. All reminded her of the scourging of Christ. The number was limited at first but gradually increased til in one day it came to fourteen, and this lasted over a ten year period as we have mentioned. The effect was to "make her right weak in bodily might". Reactions differed but were in the main unfavorable.

For some said that a wicked spirit vexed her; some said that it was a sickness; some said she had drunk too much wine; some banned her; some wished she was in the harbor; some wished she was on the sea in a bottomless boat; and thus each man as he thought. Other ghostly men loved her the more. (p.58)

There is another interesting feature that caused much comment. In connection with this weeping she would fall convulsively to the ground and even turn blue. She tells us:

1. Editor's note

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Some said she had the falling evil, for she, with the crying wrested her body, turning from the one side to the other and waxed all blue and livid, like the color of lead. Then folk spat at her for horror of the sickness and some scorned her and said she howled as if she were a dog and banned her and cursed her and said she did much harm among the people. (92)

These boisterous sobbings and "shrill shriekings" took place also in church, and even when she was receiving the Holy Eucharist so that the priest had to turn aside and wait, and the people were thrown into commotion. (p.127)

It is not hard to imagine the disturbance when this took place during a sermon -- which happened frequently. Anyone who has had to preach or listen to preaching when a baby starts to cry will appreciate the picture, and will be inclined to sympathize with the speaker (if not long-winded) instead of with Margery Kempe. Actually, this stirred up active resentment against her when, after the first experience, a Preaching Friar refused to let her attend his sermons and disrupt them in this manner. He even preached against her (p.p.136, 139). Margery does not seem to have appreciated it (she has a revelation against him) but the friar was clearly within his rights. He was preaching for the benefit of a congregation, not for her sake alone, and when she could not prevent a disturbance but attracted all this notoriety it was but natural to request her to remain away.

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a sore point. First, it is not within her power to control it, she asserts often. Then she gives an argument based on the power of the Passion of Christ to arouse this emotion. The passage is really touching and deserves quotation in full:

It is not to be marvelled at, if this creature cried and made wondrous faces and expressions, when we may see each day with the eye both men and women, some for the loss of worldly goods, some for affection of their kindred, or worldly friendships, through over much study and earthly affection, and most of all for inordinate love and fleshly affection, if their friends are parted from them, they will cry and roar and wring their hands as if they had no wits or senses, and yet know they well that they are displeasing God.

And, if a man counsel them to leave or cease their weeping and crying, they will say that they cannot; they loved their friend so much, and he was so gentle and so kind to them, that they may in no way forget him. How much more might they weep, cry, and roar, if their most beloved friends were with violence taken in their sight and with all manner of reproof, brought before the judge, wrongfully condemned to death, and especially so spiteful a death as Our Merciful Lord suffered for our sake. How would they suffer it? No doubt they would both cry and roar and avenge themselves if they might, or else men would say they were no friends. (p.59)

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copiously. What are we to say to this argumentation -- Margery's defense against the charge of notoriety-seeking that would refute her claim to mystic contemplation? First, there is something exaggerated in this display of Margery's. There seems an utter lack of self-control with a disagreeable public show as a result. There is an instinctive repugnance to the thought that this can be a manifestation of sanctity. And it matters not that Margery claims a sort of mission in this respect, in that she is to be an example for the rest of the world in mirroring the sorrow of Mary at the death of Christ, and a proper sorrow for personal sin. As her contemporaries told Margery, the Blessed Mother did not show this external exaggeration, and to argue on the propriety of this exaggeration because of the unreserved grief sometimes displayed by people over mundane losses and the death of friends is to put forward an invalid argument. Such uncontrolled grief is itself unjustified, and cannot be made a norm for Margery. Unreserved, wildly demonstrative grief is against the dignity of human nature. Man must control his actions at all times by the light of reason. Just as drunkenness is sinful because it is an unworthy and unjustified surrender of reason, so also is this unreserved display of grief or sorrow, more particularly when it is of frequent occurrence. If under the control of the will it would appear sinful; if not, it could hardly serve as a religious example for the rest of mankind.

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Margery's appeal to the example of the saints is likewise invalid. Undoubtedly, many of them had what is called the "gift of tears" and this is looked upon as a spiritual grace-- Saint Ignatius would be an excellent example in that he thought God had hidden His face from him on the day when he did not shed tears over the Passion of Christ and his own sins. Yet there is a control and a moderation displayed by these saints that is lacking in the case of Margery. For example, St. Elizabeth of Hungary was cited by Margery as having wept abundantly, but her biographer, Lulu Von Strauss und Torney, notes the calmness of her countenance the while: "es leuchtete allezeit klar und lieblich und sie war froelich in allen ihren Leiden und Widerwaertigkeiten, gleich als ob sie keine Beschwer davon haette."¹

Margery also invokes the authority of Blessed Mary of Oignies-- again in vain. It is true that her first biographer, Cardinal James de Vitry, says that "Her steps might be traced in the Church she was walking in by her tears on the pavement", but she does not exhibit the extraordinary abandon of Margery or create a continual public disturbance. And again her biographer warns sharply that her example is not proposed for general imitation in all details. Fr. Thurston makes an incidental observation on the possibility of this being a nervous reaction which throws doubt on whether it can be acclaimed too unreservedly as an example of mystic phenomena. He says,

1. Lulu von Strauss und Torney, "Das Leben der heiligen Elizabeth", p.69

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Her biographer lays stress on her abnormal tearfulness, which he and others regard as a spiritual grace. Even if, in these days, we should be more disposed to treat it as a physical reaction from the tremendous nervous strain to which she subjected her body, it must not be forgotten that the gift of tears was deemed by many to be a mark of true compunction of heart.¹

The extraordinary sobbing and shrieking of Margery, then, is far from establishing her claim to mysticism. And to us it seems to be rather a bid for notice, and such a view challenges the high sanctity that the mystic must enjoy. Even if it were unconscious -- a nervous disorder -- it would do much to eliminate all possibility of such high sanctity. For Margery, as we have seen, asserted that this phenomenon was supernatural in character and her revelations dealt with the matter. Anything that throws doubt on the possibility of this being from God -- and we have urged the difficulties -- is a potent attack on her mystic claims. In fairness to Margery we add, however, that if someone wishes to urge that this was not intended as a rational phenomenon at all or a mystic characteristic, but was willed by God to discredit Margery and thereby be the occasion for more merit -- there are passages that do present this view of the phenomenon as having a penitential aspect -- we do not see how such a view could be refuted. But it still would not explain how it could serve as a model for the world of the

1. Butler's, "Lives of the Saints", Ed. Thurston, June 23rd.

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of the sorrow the Christian should feel over the sufferings of Christ and his own sins, and that is an important aspect that is stressed by Margery. Again the findings are not conclusive. We shall be satisfied, however, if this but adds a little towards the clarification of the total picture.

Connected with the sobbing of Margery was her wearing of white clothes, which has already been mentioned. It is another phenomenon that drew attention to Margery and caused comment. She explains that it was a command of God that she don these clothes that were ordinarily reserved for maidens. We cannot, a priori, deny the possibility of such a divine command. But we note again that it is something external that would -- and did -- cause much notice and remark. It would be an important argument in the case of those who wish to paint Margery as a notoriety seeker, and thus impugn her humility.

We must take this opportunity to discuss, in connection with the wearing of white clothes, another angle of Margery's life -- her seeming revolt against matrimony or at least her own marriage. Was her resumption of maiden's clothing a symbol, perhaps not consciously recognized by her, of her regret that she had not remained a virgin and served God in that state?

An attentive reading of her "Book" does raise the question whether Margery's attitude towards marriage, and more especially her own marriage, was not a little warped. The teaching of the Church is based on St. Paul¹ that virginity^{that} is consecrated
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An attentive reading of her "Book" does raise the question whether Margery's attitude towards marriage, and more especially her own marriage, was not a little warped. The teaching of the Church is based on St. Paul¹ that virginity is consecrated ^{that} I. I. Cor. V

to God and observed for the service of God is more perfect than marriage. But there is no attempt to lessen the worth of marriage which was intended by God² as the means to propagate the race, and was raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament. Margery, however, speaks slightly of marriage as somehow unclean (p.16) and would rather her husband was murdered, she says, than consent willingly to pay the debt of matrimony, even though this would not be sinful for her. We have here, seemingly, a peculiar lack of charity for the husband to whom she had contracted special obligations, or a warped notion of marriage. Since she makes all the proper technical distinctions on occasion, it would perhaps be better to state that while her notions on marriage were orthodox, judging from her explicit statements, yet it would appear that she did not bring her own personal actions into consonance with her abstract principles, and that is definitely a blot on her claim to holiness. Even a cursory reading gives the impression that she used great moral force to win her husband to a life of continency. How different, we may note here, the conduct of the great Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, to whom Margery referred on occasion! Her spirit of mortification led her to wear shabby clothing in her husband's absence, but, when he returned home, she tried to be most beautiful for his sake and to prevent any sin on his part against the marriage vows.

and to prevent any sin on his part against the marriage vows. he returned home, she tried to be most beautiful for his sake her to wear shabby clothing in her husband's absence, but, when Margery referred on occasion! Her spirit of mortification led conduct of the great Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, to whom to a life of continency. How different, we may note here, the impression that she used great moral force to win her husband claim to holiness. Even a cursory reading gives the her abstract principles, and that is definitely a blot on her she did not bring her own personal actions into consonance with judging from her explicit statements, yet it would appear that to state that while her notions on marriage were orthodox, technical distinctions on occasion, it would perhaps be better warped notion of marriage. Since she makes all the proper husband to whom she had contracted special obligations, or a have here, seemingly, a peculiar lack of charity for the matrimony, even though this would not be sinful for her. We murdered, she says, then consent willingly to pay the debt of as somehow unclear (p. 16) and would rather her husband was a sacrament. Margery, however, speaks slightly of marriage propagate the race, and was raised by Christ to the dignity of of marriage which was intended by God^s as the means to than marriage. But there is no attempt to lessen the worth to God and observed for the service of God is more perfect

In connection with Margery's attitude to marriage, here might be the place to raise the question of her relation to her family. It is most peculiar that she should have fourteen children, as she says, yet make hardly a reference to them. We learn that she had a revelation once that she was with child, and she tells the story of a grown-up son's life, marriage, and death, merely as a prelude to her spiritual labors in his behalf, and her subsequent journeying with his widow back to her homeland. It would seem to argue lack of balance and moral defects, perhaps, that Margery is so concentrated on visions, revelations, and pilgrimages, yet has no reference to the duties of her state as wife and mother. And all genuine sanctity must first see to the observance of the duties of one's state of life. Anything else is a delusion. Margery's pilgrimages were numerous, as she tells us -- both in England and abroad, and they must have been made when she was fairly young and vigorous -- except for the pilgrimage to Germany and Norway, narrated in the second book, which were made when she must have been about sixty. Yet, if she had fourteen children, all the vigorous period of her life, (let us say up to the age of forty-five) would be taken up by care for her husband and family. And at forty-five she may well have had young children ranging from ten to thirteen years who would require a mother's care and guidance. We know that a pilgrimage abroad would take many weeks and Margery's

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pilgrimages were many, both in England and abroad.¹ (p.16)

Who cared for Margery's children and husband on these occasions and when she was spending four or five hours in church each morning and afternoon? It would be some solution to argue that infant mortality was high in those ages and Margery's admission that she had fourteen children is not an admission that all lived. But the difficulty still remains. We cannot thus arbitrarily dispatch all fourteen children. An interesting angle crops up here. Did Margery give the children to others for up-bringing? There is a suspicion of this in Chapter XXI where Margery converses with Our Lord:

She said to Him: 'Ah! Lord, what shall I do for the keeping of my children?'

Our Lord said: 'Dread thee not: I shall arrange for a keeper! (P.39)

We cannot make any definite accusations, but there is raised a serious doubt whether Margery had proper regard for the duties of her state. And that is another difficulty urged against her mysticism. A spiritual director, ordinarily speaking, would have to counsel Margery that since she was already in the married state, a wife and mother, the state of virginity was clearly not intended by Providence for her. Sanctity would lie in the perfect fulfillment of the unobtrusive, domestic duties of her vocation and not in seeking for dramatic external

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things. That Margery did not follow this prosaic path is very clear.

Was Margery obedient? Here again doubts crowd in. We have unavoidably the impression that she "managed" her husband when he was reluctant to give up his marriage rights at her request. There seems to have been much importunity on her part, and, perhaps, alternation between threats of divine punishment and pledges of divine reward. She tells her husband that she has a revelation on the matter, and we find him confessing that he dare not insist on his marriage rights. (16 seq.) She herself confesses that "he was ever a good man and an easy man to her", and he seems to have had little to say in the matter of her pilgrimages. Reading between the lines, we are tempted to report him "henpecked". She had refused to modify her vanity in clothing at his bidding before her "conversion", and let him know she thought him an inferior match in marriage, and we remember her independent business venture.

There is the same suspicion that she "managed" her confessors, whose business it was to encourage her striving for sanctity. Here was a woman who not only cooperated, but had to be restrained. She claimed to have visions that were to direct them - a complete reversal of relationship and an awkward situation to handle. She informs them that she is to wear white clothes, go on pilgrimages, etc., by direction of heaven. Verification of these instructions is, of course, impossible. If they are reluctant to accept her witness,

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they must examine her manner of life, which was certainly externally pious. The matter of her visions, too, is pious in content. All, however, were not impressed; she complains to an anchorite on one occasion:

Good Sir, what shall I do? He that is my confessor in your absence is right sharp with me; he will not believe my feelings; he setteth not by them; he holdeth them but trifles and japes, and that is great pain to me, for I love him well and would fain follow his counsel.

There is the additional fact that she chooses her confessors at will, for she refuses, by direction of God, the aid of one spiritual guide who opposes her manner of dress. (p. 90)

Margery repeatedly, constantly, seeks direction and guidance from spiritual advisers yet she made a very extraordinary journey abroad -- to Germany -- at an advanced age, when she was totally unprovided for, without the permission of her confessor, in fact, against his expressed will. "Ye may not go." (P.206) It is true she has a "revelation" that it is God's will, and Our Lord tells her "for I am above thy ghostly father". Here is itself a peculiar fact that would cause great difficulty in a canonization process. God governs souls ordinarily through their spiritual advisers and He always exacts obedience to them. If the director is obstructing God's purposes, God has other ways of bringing him to see the light, but no saint would disobey in a matter that is

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Other examples might be adduced where Margery practices obedience, for instance, where she doffs her white clothes for a time at the command of a confessor. (We note that she reverted to them, however.) Complete, perfect and constant obedience are expected in a mystic.

Did Margery enjoy the tranquility of soul that is demanded as an indication of contemplation by Tersea? Here we come to a peculiar circumstance of Margery's life. The lives of the saints show us that they stressed the need of having only one confessor for the purpose of continuity of spiritual guidance. Circumstances may have given them several, but a large number would be a remarkable exception. Yet Margery, in at least fifteen different passages, discloses that she went to many different divines to reveal her life and visions and to seek assurance that her wonders were from God. For instance: "This creature showed her manner of living to many a worthy clerk, to worshipful doctors of divinity, both religious men and others of secular habit.."(P.34) It matters not here that she reports a favorable verdict from them. We still cannot explain the constant flitting from one to another, except on two suppositions, continual fear of illusion -- or in attempt to parade her

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wonders, and both horns of this dilemma are unfavorable to Margery's claim of mysticism.

We have other indications that Margery had some doubts at least, of her visions. In her own words:

She would have suffered any bodily penance than these feelings, if she might have put them away, for the dread she had of illusions and deceits of her ghostly enemies.

She had sometimes such great trouble with such feelings when they fell not true to her understanding, that her confessor feared that she would have fallen into despair therewith. And then, after her trouble and her great fears, it would be shown unto her soul how the feelings should be understood. (P.44)

Certainly then, Margery often doubted her own marvels.

Can we also read between the lines and say that sometimes her revelations had to be amended at the insistence of actual occurrence, for instance, when she says, "for revelations be hard sometimes to understand", and "sometimes those that men think were revelations, are deceits and illusions, and therefore it is not expedient to give readily credence to every stirring but soberly abide, and pray if it be of God"? (P.199) Margery does not admit explicitly to any such illusion on her part, denies it in fact -- but she certainly shows a good deal of doubting and spiritual flitting about for assurance -- or notoriety.

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Several times we had occasion to find evidences of exaggeration and lack of balance in Margery's life. To this is added the charge of imprudence. We learn that she undertakes journeys without proper escort and with great danger, she admits of robbery and attack. Is not this presumption? The pilgrimage to Germany was made when she was old, recovering from sickness, and without any reasonable provision, even in the matter of clothing. She gives away all her money, and that of others too, when she is in a foreign country, and, as a result, must beg and live on charity. Margery may imagine revelations for justification. But for us that is something not established, and these things have, on the face of them, a show of impulsiveness and imprudence.

Now to sum up, We raised the question whether Margery had the holiness demanded by St. Teresa, peace of soul, humility, obedience, etc., by which this could be tested. I think that, on the strength of the observations we have been compelled to make, serious doubt has been sown whether Margery verifies these requirements in her life and actions. Her humility, obedience, attitude to marriage and family have been seriously questioned. This would cast doubt on her possession of mysticism or contemplation. Now we pass on to another subject.

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Accidental phenomena doubtful:

There is often another check on the life of a mystic -- the secondary or accidental mystical phenomena that are often present and which can be the object of some investigation. It cannot be urged that Margery's wild sobbing and convulsive writhing on the ground are an indication of ecstasy since the characteristics are so different. Ecstasy as seen in the mystics is evidenced by passivity and calm, and has no adverse effect on the health, while Margery's crying shows wild convulsive moments that are the opposite of passivity and leaves her weak and exhausted. So in the line of mystic phenomena there is left but Margery's supernatural visions and locutions for consideration.

With Msgr. Farges we can define vision in the mystical sense as: "The outward or inward supernatural perception of any object naturally invisible to man".¹ Such objects would be not only God, but Our Lord Jesus Christ, the angels, saints and the souls in purgatory. The perception may be inward or outward and brings up the distinction between three different kinds of visions. It is external if there is a real object in question, perceptible by the senses, e.g. the appearance of Our Lord to the Apostles after his resurrection. It is internal imaginative, if

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the object is not perceptible outwardly by the senses but is produced by the imaginative faculties; and internal - intellectual if produced by the mind without sensible images. The scenes of the Apocalypse were imaginative visions; many visions of St. Teresa, those in which she had enlightenment in truths naturally inaccessible, were intellectual visions. So far as we can judge from Margery's reporting, she enjoyed all three kinds. The vision of Our Lord when she was cured from madness seems from her description to have been external. Her visions were generally intellectual when she introduces them with such expressions as Our Lord "ravished" her spirit or "said to her mind" (pp.22, 24, etc.) Her vision of the Passion, Chapter 79, seems to have been of the internal-imaginative type.

It is difficult to pass judgment on these visions. In general, we can say that the content is pious, and seemingly in harmony with revelation, tradition and the ordinary teaching of the Church, while the manner is not repugnant. There are two visions, however, that offer some difficulties. When Margery was in Rome it happened that she had no confessor who could understand English and shrive her. Our Lord sent St. John the Evangelist, "so that she saw him and heard him in her ghostly understanding as she would have done another priest by her bodily wits" and "she told him all her sins, and all her troubles, with many grievous tears" and "he enjoined her the penance that she should do for her trespass, and absolved her

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of her sins with sweet words and meek ones, highly strengthening her to trust in the mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and bade her that she should receive the Sacrament of the Altar, in the Name of Jesus." The extraordinary thing is that Margery uses terms here that would indicate an internal vision of the imaginative kind. But the teaching of the Church in the administration of the Sacrament demands not only oral confession on Margery's part but oral absolution from the Confessor as well.¹ The matter and form of the Sacraments from the very definition must be sensible. It is difficult to explain this absolution then, and Margery's assurance that she had been absolved. And if she is un-orthodox here or "deceived", doubt is cast on her whole mystic character.

The second difficulty has to do with Margery's "Spiritual Marriage". This is described in Chapter 35, and we have treated it as an important evidence of Margery's claim to mysticism. The occasion seemed to be Margery's predilection for devotion to the humanity of Christ, "and she had no knowledge of the dalliance of the Godhead, for all her love and her affection were set in the manhood of Christ and there-of she had knowledge, and she would not for anything be parted therefrom." (P.74) God would not lead her to a greater devotion of the Godhead: "Daughter, I will have thee wedded to My Godhead because I shall show that My Secrets and My counsels, for thou

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shalt live with me without end." (Ibid)

There follows the marriage ceremony before the court of heaven and the Father said to her:

I take thee Margery for my wedded wife,
for fairer, for fouler, for richer,
for poorer, so that thou be kindly and
gentle to do as I bid thee. (P.75)

The description is too elaborate and literal to portray but a figure of speech. Margery reports a real vision in which she is mystically united to the Father of Heaven. But this presents a theological difficulty and an extraordinary departure from the procedure we find verified among the other mystics, St. Bridget of Sweden, St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi, Blessed Angela of Foligno, St. Colette, Catherine of Siena, Rose of Lima, Teresa of Avalon, etc. One and all agree in specifying that the marriage is between the soul of the mystic and Jesus Christ the Word made Flesh. Not only does Margery fail to reveal the usual mystic preliminaries that prepare for the union, the spiritual betrothal or marriage promise, which would be too significant in her life for her to pass over -- but the union is deliberately presented as higher stage of union when she is raised from devotion to the humanity of Christ to union with the Godhead. Remarkably, then, she states it to be between the Father and the soul. Let us quote Msgr. Farges to show the difficulty that is in question:

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sacred contract. It consists once more in an intellectual vision in which the Word Incarnate shows Himself with words and testimony informing the soul that she is raised to the dignity of the bride. This alliance is thus affected in the presence of the august Trinity, which witnesses it, but -- let it be well noted it is effected by the Word Incarnate:¹ which tallies most wonderfully with the highest data of theology.

And it is not only the Word, but the Word clothed with our humanity, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who becomes the veritable spouse of our souls. (The reason follows why the spiritual marriage is thus restricted to Jesus Christ.) Alone, indeed, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, has willed to espouse our human nature by His blessed incarnation, in order to be able to unite Himself more easily with the children of men, and knit with them those bonds of friendship which always imply a certain likeness between the friends. To this end He made Himself like to us, and, together with our flesh clothed Himself with all its infirmities and miseries, save only sin and ignorance. Now these ties of friendship with the most holy and privileged souls become as intimate and indissoluble as those of the sacrament of marriage. The name and role of spouse of our souls, then, must only be attributed to the Word Incarnate, to the exclusion of the other two Persons;¹ for it is but the continuation and extension of His union with our humanity.²

This suffices for a study of the life of Margery Kempe in relation to the effects that follow contemplation (holiness of life) and that must be evidenced in the life of the mystic,

1. Italics mine

2. "Mystical Phenomena", pp. 182,183

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as well as of the accidental mystical phenomena that sometimes accompany it. In the light of these facts we are justified in attempting to pass an objective judgment. It is unfavorable to Margery, the Mystic. Her mystic character is not only not established in the light of her own testimony as weighed in the balance of mystical phenomena, but very serious doubts have been raised that argue against it on the score of her moral character and defects in the mystic phenomena themselves. Our judgment is not merely left suspended and the issue doubtful. It is definitely adverse. A half-way mystic, or part mystic, or mystic whose mysticism gives rise to insuperable misgivings because of inherent weaknesses, is no mystic at all.

Miss Cholmeley's book:

How are we to reply to the arguments of those who see in Margery a genuine mystic? There is but one author who treats of Margery at such length as to require consideration -- Katherine Cholmeley who has written the only full length book to date on Margery Kempe (aside from Margery's own autobiography). Her title, "Margery Kempe, Genius and Mystic", is significant of her view point. It is a colorful book warm with human sympathy and appreciation for asceticism but she is, we think, uncritical. This is hinted, perhaps, by the fact that she first distrusted Margery's mystic claims and wrote a very unfavorable article. Then when this view was unacceptable to the editor of the "Rosary" magazine, Fr.

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Gumbley, O.P., who refused to print it, consultation with him led to a complete reversal of her position and to the conclusion that Margery was a genuine mystic and genius. Her book is enthusiastic but unscientific, nor does she ever grasp the problem of reconciling Margery's strange behavior and variation from norm with genuine mysticism. I think it is not unfair to say that she has written a laudatory biographical treatise with a "literature" slant rather than a critical study such as the name would imply. Her principal argument is that of "authority. She alludes to Fr. McNabb's opinion that Margery is a genuine mystic with great respect, and advances this as one of her strongest proofs. But there is no real effort to treat the difficulties seriously or to refute the arguments based on Margery's hysteria and exaggerated conduct. Miss Cholmeley's argument from authority is counterbalanced by the authorities her opponents can summon in support of their views. We venture to say, therefore, that this book by no means establishes Margery's claim to mysticism -- or to genius either. The arguments we allege have not received adequate treatment and some were not considered at all.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE POSSIBILITY OF DELIBERATE FRAUD

No evidence of fraud:

We feel justified, then, in holding that Margery was not a genuine mystic. Does it follow that she was a conscious deceiver, a religious hypocrite or pseudo-saint as she was regarded by so many of her contemporaries who reviled her, spat on her, threw water on her and called her strumpet? The present writer feels that this is a point that will be raised and warmly discussed long after general opinion will agree in rejecting her mystical claims. We have seen that anyone who made the extraordinary claims she did and asserted such privileges in the spiritual order cannot be passed off as a simple soul, a pious ascetic and no more. We are thus confronted with an evidently complete disjunction. Margery was either a mystic, a mad woman, or a religious hypocrite who pretended to sanctity and privileges she did not possess. We have now succeeded, we feel, in casting great doubts on the validity of her claim to mysticism. This leaves no choice but to present her as deceived or deceiving. But "The Book of Margery Kempe" does not give the impression of being the work of a hypocrite. That is evidenced, perhaps, by the spontaneous verdict of reviewers, the majority of whom saw her as egoistic and strange but did not think of condemning her as a hypocrite. For one thing, Margery gives a frank portrait of herself that

THE POSSIBILITY OF UNBIASED JUDGMENT

No evidence at hand:

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does not hide the blemishes. She reveals sins and weaknesses that do not leave us with a portrait done in all bright colors. She admits earlier sins; she mentions ^{at the} opening that she was a target of much opposition, that she was very unpopular.

Although she gives the impression that she is an innocent victim, a chosen soul suffering for God's glory, she does not attempt to black out the causes on her part that explain this antagonism. She admits that one of her principal enemies, the Preaching Friar, was a fine preacher, famous throughout England, who spoke "full holily and devoutly" and the way she reports things, while vivid, does not give the impression of deliberate falsification. There does seem also indication of genuine religious spirit. We venture to say, therefore, that she might have unconsciously colored the truth but she did not intentionally create fiction. It would seem that we must exonerate her of deliberate deceit. So while we by no means exclude all possibility that Margery could have been a religious hypocrite or could have succeeded gradually in leading herself into a state of self-deception, we think it much more probable that she was sincere. She was not a pseudo-saint.

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CHAPTER IX
INVESTIGATION OF MADNESS

Working hypothesis:

This leaves us with but one possibility left open -- that Margery was not entirely rational at all times. We hesitate to use the term mad because of its connotation. Let us rather say that, when all the facts of Margery's weird career are thoroughly sifted, she gives the impression of being an extreme "eccentric" along certain lines, one who was unbalanced religiously, the victim of a nervous disorder with a tendency towards religious fanaticism. We can hold to this opinion and still make allowance for boundless energy, skill in handling people, a shrewd wit and tart tongue on occasion, and an utter devotion to what she conceived of as high piety. On the other hand it would explain her visions that do not ring true in all details, her eccentricity in dress and conduct, especially her peculiar weeping and shrieking which would be revealed as a form of hysteria. A certain exaggeration all along the line would be accounted for. And if this view is seen as probable, it will be a strong argument against the validity of her mystic claims, a corroboration of our viewpoint. The main argument for this opinion is, of course, that it is a working hypothesis that is the best all-round explanation of certain peculiarities of Margery's career and life. It would explain that Margery's religious absorption

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and many of her religious phenomena were due to her own individual character and its response to motivation as well as to the mysticism that was in the air at her time, and that activated some of her great contemporaries. It was to this she turned for solution of her problems. This view presupposes an abnormal character or a normal character breaking under great strain.

I believe that psychiatry lends its support to such an interpretation of Margery. A comparison of the phenomena of her life with the finding of abnormal psychology would result, it seems to me, in a verdict that hers was a case of Paranoia or Hysteria; the latter seems the more probable. It is significant that such judgments have already been passed on Margery. (Allusion will be made to them presently).

Paranoia investigated:

For a definition and description of Paranoia we quote from Professor McDougal:

Morbid delusions are found among the symptoms of mental disorder, especially in Dementia Praecox or Schizophrenia. But there is one disorder generally recognized as "a disease" (i.e., a disorder characterized by specific symptoms and course, and deserving, therefore, of a special name), in which the morbid delusion (or delusions) is the essential and sole symptom. To this disorder the name Paranoia is given.

In a typical case of Paranoia the patient has some fixed delusion which has become

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In a typical case of Paranoia the patient has some fixed delusion which has become

systemized: that is to say, the delusion has become the nucleus of a system of false beliefs arrived at by way of "rationalization", in the endeavor to harmonize other facts and beliefs with the original delusion. In all other respects the patient's mental life seems normal; but, wherever facts or events come into relation with the delusion (and the patient, owing to the continued operation of the repressed affective tendencies from which the delusion springs, is very apt to discover or fabricate such relations, the false beliefs dominate the true and secure, the right of way. Kraepelin, to whom the recognition of Paranoia as a distinct disease is chiefly due, has defined it as "the furtive development, resulting from inner causes, of a lasting immovable delusional system that is accompanied by the complete retention of clearness and order in thinking, willing, and acting." ¹

We may further describe its origin in the words of Bror Gadelius:

Paranoia postulates a morbid dislocation of the reactive emotions evoked in us in our dealings with others or in contact with our environment.

The paranoiac is spontaneously in the state which, in a normal person, only arises after experiencing impertinent, disagreeable or hostile behavior from other people. ²

He stresses this affective abnormality as a source of delusions.

1. William McDougal, "Outline of Abnormal Psychology", P.335
2. Bror Gadelius, "Human Mentality" (An Outline of general Psychiatry), PP.222,223

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Noyes likewise insists that it arises from "intra-psychic conflicts" (no organic cause), and constitutes "a permanent and total life reaction to the unacceptable and disowned aspects of the personality. Sublimation and repression having failed to deal successfully with these undesirable trends and desires, the patient meets them by the mechanisms of projection and compensation."¹ The two principal delusions are the delusion of persecution by some person real or fancied and the delusion of grandeur. (e. g. Napoleon complex). Hallucinations may be present though Noyes claims they are rare in the true Paranoia.

Applied to Margery Kempe, the exponents of this view will claim that it explains adequately her impression that she was an object of dislike to those about her (delusion of persecution) and to the devils who tempted her on occasion. It would clarify, even more, her belief that she was a mystic and favored servant of God -- delusion of grandeur. One of the chief appeals lies in the fact that the disease leaves the patient normal in all that does not enter into the field of his delusion. There is no deterioration of will, memory, and mind. This is a noteworthy fact for one who would claim Margery was deranged and yet have to account for her remarkable character and her book.

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An interesting study of Margery Kempe along these lines was made by Miss Rita Miller in a biographical term paper for Professor Winslow of Boston University. She developed the idea that the repressed sexuality that is hidden in the "Book of Margery Kempe" accounted for her Paranoia, that she was "oversexed" and "ashamed of herself". While the paper is well-worked out and ingenious, a good piece of work, it is not critical enough. A better case for Paranoia could be worked out, I think, than one based on repressed sexuality. If Margery's testimony is worth anything, it gives us to understand that she was the mother of fourteen children and after her "conversion", deliberately and freely chose, when allowed, a life of continency. It is difficult to reconcile this with a theory of "repressed sexuality". What we have, apparently, is sublimation of a normal or even strong sexual instinct - But this does not entail Paranoia, rather urges against it. It is true that Margery was attracted to the humanity of Christ particularly, but it was a characteristic of the English mysticism of the 14th century which, on the basis of influence, can be explained in Margery. There is certainly exaggeration to be found in Margery's raptures over boy babies but this can be explained on other grounds -- eccentric mysticism thus manifesting devotion to the Divine Infant. That Miss Miller labored heavily to prop up her theory seems clear from her argument that the words of Christ to Margery bidding her abstain from meat and receive His Body and Blood instead have

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"Freudian" import. There is a Biblical reference here to St. John 6, and Mt. 26, which is hardly Freudian. We do not deny that there may be indications of strong sexuality in the patient, but we doubt that we could rest a case of Paranoia on this. And everything would indicate that Margery suffered actual persecution though she brought it on herself. This is another weakness in the Paranoia claim.

Hysteria investigated:

Paranoiac symptoms may be found in Margery Kempe. We incline more, however, to the views that her case is better summed up as Hysteria. This, we feel, better explains all the the facts and covers also what might, otherwise, be considered Paranoia.

"Hysteria", Dr. Goix has said,

is a neurosis which attacks the patient from both the physical and the moral side; it is accompanied by a particular psychical state which all writers point out and describe in great detail, and this state is so constant that it enters into the definition of hysteria ... it is lack of balance or mental "degeneracy".¹

It is noteworthy that Babinski without denying this characteristic lack of balance stresses much more a pathological suggestibility which makes such patients wonderfully docile to all orders given them by their hypnotizers. There is usually a fixed or besetting idea that is developed without counter-

1. "Mystical Phenomena", P.472

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balance and invades all powers of the soul -- consciousness, attention, memory, undertaking, affections, will. This is the psychological phenomenon.

The physiological phenomena are outward and vary in greater of lesser hysteria. Lesser hysteria is essentially the same as the greater but is more abridged and less marked. Since Charcot's classical experiments, four phases have been recognized: (a) The first is convulsive, characterized by a sensation of swelling in the throat, buzzing in the ears, blows in the head, and so on; (b) the second is that of great contortions over the whole body, generally like the arc of a circle; (c) the third is that of passional attitudes -- fear, lewdness, anger, ecstasy, etc. -- sometimes with silent, but more often with talkative mimicry, connected with the obsessing idea; (d) the fourth shows scenes of delirium, with or without hallucinations, and mad accesses of laughing or weeping. Msgr. Farges notes that the general health is affected after a seizure, as would be expected from the violence of the symptoms described. Noyes observes that it is sometimes accompanied by dream states in which the patient may have hallucinations, and which are of a wish-fulfilling nature.

He observes moreover:

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and given to laughing and crying spells on apparently small cause, are impulsive, are offended by trivialities, show a tendency to be suggestible and are easily influenced. Many are vain, self-centred, wish for sympathy, exaggerate their symptoms, or even simulate them. If such people think they are not sufficiently the center of attention, they may attempt to attract notice by various theatrical methods.¹

The cause behind hysteria would appear to be "intra psychic conflict or the repressed wishes and experiences with all their attached emotion".² In connection with this may be cited a passage from Dom Thomas Verner Moore.³ He narrates that a psychosis had developed from worry over the results of solitary sexual sin in fifty psychopathic cases admitted to the Iowa State Psychopathic Hospital -- which were eventually cured when the misunderstanding was removed -- and he observes:

If a single acute emotional experience of any kind can lead to a prolonged disorder it would be most surprising if chronic intense emotional strain could be neglected in considering the etiology of the psychoses.⁴

We may add that this holds "a fortiori" for the neuroses which are recognized as being less severe disturbances of the mind.

These notions on hysteria will suffice for us to test whether the phenomena of Margery's life can be explained under this viewpoint. There is, first of all, the question of lack

1. Arthur P. Noyes "A Textbook of Psychiatry", PP. 177,178
2. Ibid, P.183
3. Dom Thomas Verner Moore, "The Nature and Treatment of Mental Disorders", P.88
4. Thomas Vernon Moore, "Nature and Treatment of Mental Diseases", P.88

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of balance which is essential to hysteria. Margery is peculiarly open to attack here. We have already adverted to the lack of balance in her "mysticism" where marvels abound but do not ring true. It is, I believe strongly, a remarkable characteristic running all through her career. Let us note some of the incidents that illustrate this. First, she admits to extreme extravagance of dress and behavior at one stage of her life in order to impress people. Secondly, she failed in brewing because she impulsively plunged into a business that she was totally unacquainted with. Thirdly she gave away all her own money, and another's too, when on pilgrimage in a foreign land. Fourthly, she was shriven at one period of her life two or three times a day. This is extraordinary. If she was scrupulous, this is, in most cases, evidence of lack of balance. Fifthly, she feared for her chastity and knew well the dangers she was exposing it to, yet went on pilgrimages with little or no money and unattended. Finally she neglected her family completely. Other examples might be adduced. These suffice. They reveal an impulsive, unbalanced character.

The physiological factors of hysteria seem to be present. Margery falls down and twists convulsively so that two men had to hold her; her face turns blue and she cries, "I die"; she hears noises and often sees specks in the air. She is so frightening a spectacle that people are deeply offended and wish to maltreat her. This is certainly not evidence of mysticism or the reaction to it.

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There is suggestibility, it would seem. As to the manner in which it is evidenced, we shall discuss later whether her whole mystical trend cannot be explained satisfactorily by her internal religious commotion and the mystical influences she was subjected to. There seems to be further evidence of this suggestibility in her confused feeling that she could not resist the solicitation of a friend to adultery (P.8) nor the mental temptations of a later period (P.132). And she is convinced that the control of her loud sobbing and shrieking is not in her power. (P.57) In fact, she advances this as vindication of her conduct. We see it as illustrative of her disorder.

Her visions can be accounted for under the supposition of hysteria.¹ We suppose that her lack of balance was an innate characteristic. There followed an emotional crisis at the age of twenty which was extremely severe -- so severe that it brought on temporary madness as she admits. She says she had concealed a sin in confession and feared dying in childbirth with this on her soul. For a believing Catholic, there could be no greater anguish. (We recall once more what Moore has to say about the possible effect of worry on the mind.) Her confessor is harsh and she can have no relief in confession. Her guilt complex must solve itself somehow and does by the suggestion (easily possible to her weakened state) that Our

1. Hallucinations, convulsions, nausea, may be symptoms of Hysteria. cf. Edward A. Strecker, "Fundamentals of Psychiatry", pp. 139,140

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Lord Himself appeared to reassure her. This brings her mental relief and will be retained, therefore, in other hallucinations at a later period. She begins to move in a narrow circle of ideas that center around the Passion of Christ and sorrow for sin -- "fixed idea". We admit that the Passion of Christ played an important part in medieval mysticism and may have been adopted by her under that influence, but it may have become an obsession with her.

Thus does the supposition of hysteria account for the phenomena of Margery's life without our having to strain her into the ranks of mystics. There is one difficulty which we frankly admit and advert to. Margery's book does not give evidence of any complete breakdown of all faculties of the person such as generally characterizes at least greater hysteria - in the opinion of some authors anyway. She reveals, for example, shrewdness, energy, and strong will. We may answer, however, that hers may not have been an extreme case of Hysteria and need not show the most advanced characteristics. Furthermore she admits serious sickness long continued of head, back and stomach (P.125) which are significant from our viewpoint. Also, we are seeing her through the medium of her own work, and if we suppose that hers was a character explainable in terms of Hysteria, we must at once follow up with the judgment that much of her reporting was colored, that though her writing may be subjectively true -- true as she saw it -- it would be objectively (to some extent and where her

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fixations and "visions" are concerned) false. The Margery we see may not have lived in the fifteenth century-- outside Margery's imagination -- and an argument cannot be urged too strongly against us which is based on her character and accomplishments as reported by herself.

It is comforting to have corroboration for this view of Margery in the authority of Fr. Herbert Thurston, S.J., who advances the same opinion. In her prefatory notes to the critical edition of Margery's book, Miss Hope Emily Allen thinks an "expert" judgment has been handed down. Fr. Thurston states: "That Margery was a victim of hysteria can hardly be open to doubt".¹ He also thinks that Margery through her hysteria became a mirror of the influences to which she had been subject.

We have still to explain Margery's preoccupation with mysticism. It fits well into the supposition of Hysteria. One of the characteristics of this is suggestibility. The patient is easily influenced. Since Margery's repression was in the field of religion, we should expect her reaction to be along that line. She knew something of current mysticism. She had the most famous mystic authors of the time read to her for seven or eight years, she tells us. She begins, it is our claim, to imitate their style and ape their ideas but in such wise that her mental sickness seeps

1. Herbert Thurston, S.J., cf. Tablet, October 24, 1936
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through and modifies all.

What proof have we for this claim? That Margery was subjected to the influence of the mystics is clear. Fortunately, we do not have to guess what mystic writers influenced the career of Margery Kempe. She mentions a good number. A priest befriended her, she tells us, and for the space of seven or eight years read to her from mystic authors. But her own words tell the story well:

Afterwards the same priest loved her and trusted her full much, and blessed the time that ever he knew her, for he found great ghostly comfort in her, and she caused him to look up much good scripture, and many a good doctor, which he would not have done at that time, had she not been there.

He read to her many a good book of high contemplation and other books such as the Bible, with doctors' views thereon, St. Bride's Book, Hilton's book, Bonaventure, Stimulus Amoris, Incendium Amoris, and such others. (PP. 130-31)

We can understand Margery's interest in mysticism, not only because it was an unconscious solution to her difficulties, but also because she lived in the flowering of English mysticism. She was almost a contemporary of Richard Rolle (1349), and she was contemporaneous with Walter Hilton (1396) and with Mother Juliana, whose revelations professedly date from 1373. She was very much interested in St. Bridget of Sweden and her daughter St. Catherine, and was in Rome at the time of the celebrations over the confirmation of St. Bridget's canonization. She tells us that she made inquiries about her

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from her maid and visited the room in which she died. She

was also attracted to Blessed Mary of Oignies.

It is instructive here to trace some of the apparent

influence of these mystics on Margery. That she should have

written her book at all may have been due to the fact that

St. Bridget and the Blessed Juliana had written down their

revelations. There are several imitations of St. Bridget in

fact. Bridget had visions, went on pilgrimages, fasted much,

refused marriage after her husband's death through love of

continence, and was raised to the "spiritual marriage".¹

Margery's life reads like an echo in these details. In

addition, St. Bridget's revelations show that frequently she

rebuked corruption and that friends invoked her to ascertain

the fate of their departed. We recall how all this is found in

Margery's career and to no mean extent. Mary of Oignies and

Elizabeth of Hungary are mentioned by name when she defends her

weeping.² She was noteworthy too for her devotion to the

humanity of Christ. Holie and Hilcon have the same devotion.

Helen Gardner remarks in an article on Hilcon:

This devotion, so intimate and tender,
both in its meditation on the Manhood
and its contemplation of the divinity
is at the heart of the ascetic.³

1. Catholic Encyclopedia - St. Bridget of Sweden
2. Butler's Lives of the Saints - (Elizabeth of Hungary - Nov. 13)
3. Helen S. Gardner, "Walter Hilcon and the Mystical Tradition in England", "Essays and Studies", 1936

Margery was wrapt up in the Passion of Christ. That same absorption, however, she shared with St. Bridget, Richard Rolle, and Walter Hilton. She stressed the idea of friendship with Christ in her visions. Hilton had done the same. One of the most frequent words he loves to use is "homly" and "felawly", e.g. Prayer makes a soul "homly and felawly with Iesu". Margery uses the same words on occasion to express the same idea. Rolle had three years of spiritual purgation, and heard heavenly noises, felt heavenly heat. Margery is not to be outdone spiritually and boasts the same high graces.

Conclusion:

It is certainly noteworthy that Margery's life and characteristic ideas should tie up so closely with those of the mystics with whom she admits close acquaintanceship. Indeed, we considered her a mystic, we should be hard put to it to find her original contribution, her "raison d'etre" in the mystic field. But it is not unexplainable if we see her as a victim of Hysteria, responding ardently and closely to all the suggestions she found in her favorite authors. And thus we have our problem solved. Mystic she was not. We are confronted with strong arguments that rule out her claim. But we do not feel that it is necessary to present her as a religious hypocrite, on the strength of the evidence, for her behavior can be sufficiently explained on the grounds of hysteria.

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If the mysticism of Margery were outstanding and beyond

question, we should be unable to present this view. But it is highly doubtful and can be explained by the influence of her contemporaries among the mystics. She has nothing original to contribute, and that is another weakness in her case, and a corroboration of our view at the same time. - - - - -

We take courage, in addition, from the fact that the Church has not recognized her sanctity in any official way. She has had no influence for piety in ecclesiastical annals that we can discover - and this wants explaining since she expected to exert great influence in saving souls, and it was revealed that her glory would be made manifest after death. Nor does it seem likely - to the writer anyway - that she can ever have great influence in the Church in the future - not on the strength of her book certainly. Such an argument, if made, would be weak.¹ There are too many weak points in her mysticism, too many contradictions in her life. The Church, before it permits or bestows religious honors, demands that the virtues of the subject be heroic, positively established, and unchallengeable. Margery does not qualify, we affirm, on the strength of what we find in her book. But we hope that, nevertheless, she finds it "full merry in heaven" for there are others there besides mystics and canonized saints. Undoubtedly she would feel at home there, and we grant enthusiastically that she would be good company.

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CHAPTER X

ABSTRACT

When "The Book of Margery Kempe" was rediscovered after five hundred years, its importance was seen at once for the fields of general literature and biography, since it offers excellent background material for a study of the age, and it is a pioneer work in life-writing. Perhaps more intriguing for the general reader are the claims of Margery to be a genuine mystic. It is those mystic claims that this thesis proposes to investigate.

It is apparent at once such an investigation is rendered difficult by our five hundred years distance from Margery, and by the fact that her book was lost, and all reference to it, both contemporary and subsequent, is negligible in quantity and value. Our procedure will consist in an examination of mysticism and mystic phenomena and an application of our findings to the life of Margery Kempe. Because of her extraordinary claims, there are only three possibilities so far as Margery's status is concerned. She is either a genuine mystic as she claims to be or she is a conscious deceiver (a religious hypocrite and pseudo-saint), or, finally, she must be insane. We shall not only investigate Margery's mysticism, but also the other two alternatives; for if Margery be proved a hypocrite or mad, it would evidently confirm a negative verdict on her mysticism.

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When "The Book of Margery Kempe" was rediscovered after five hundred years, its importance was seen at once for the fields of general literature and biography, since it offers excellent background material for a study of the age, and it is a pioneer work in life-writing. Perhaps more intriguing for the general reader are the claims of Margery to be a genuine mystic. It is those mystic claims that this thesis proposes to investigate. It is apparent at once such an investigation is rendered difficult by our five hundred years distance from Margery, and by the fact that her book was lost, and all reference to it, both contemporary and subsequent, is negligible in quantity and value. Our procedure will consist in an examination of mysticism and mystic phenomena and an application of our findings to the life of Margery Kempe. Because of her extraordinary claims, there are only three possibilities so far as Margery's status is concerned. She is either a genuine mystic as she claims to be or she is a conscious deceiver (a religious hypocrite and pseudo-saint), or, finally, she must be insane. We shall not only investigate Margery's mysticism, but also the other two alternatives; for if Margery be proved a hypocrite or mad, it would evidently confirm a negative verdict on her mysticism.

Margery's extraordinary life and claims warrant this investigation. We are introduced to her at the age of twenty when she is a year married. Her life is despaired of indelivery of her first child and she sends for her father confessor to be shriven in preparation for death. She had a concealed sin from her past life , she tells us , that lay heavily on her soul. The roughness of the confessor, as well as her weakened state, brings on eight months of madness. She is cured in the course of a vision of our Lord who reassures her. There follows a gradual conversion to a life of much prayer and penance in which she enjoys contemplative prayer, visions of various heavenly persons, and goes on pilgrimages. She is bidden in revelation to wear the white clothes of a maiden, and a ring on her finger with the motto "Jesus Crist est amor meus" After some years she prevails on her husband to live a life of continency. Many marks of divine favor are given her. Besides enjoying visions and contemplative prayer, she sees the host "flutter" at consecration, is absolved on one occasion by ST. John the Evangelist, knows whether souls are in heaven, purgatory , or hell, and foretells the future. She claims, moreover, to have been granted the mystical phenomenon called the "Spiritual Marriage" which is the highest possible mystic union with God in this life.

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We have discussed, in connection with Margery's claims, the definition and nature of mysticism. It is an experimental knowledge of God, we have seen, in which the soul has immediate contact with God in a manner far superior to the union of the ordinary soul which results through the medium of ordinary channels, e.g. reason. Mysticism is synonymous with 'contemplation' which was the term used earlier in the church. This contemplation must be distinguished from asceticism which is preparation, at least for active contemplation. Asceticism is characterized by the "Three Ways" -- the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages -- that mark the development of the soul and its growth in holiness. Four kinds of prayer portray this increasing sanctity -- oral, mental, affective and contemplative. This final (contemplative) prayer is active contemplation which is open to every soul who cooperates with divine grace.

There is a higher stage -- passive contemplation -- where for certain moments the soul is passive under the hand of God. This is the realm of the mystic. It must be distinguished, however, from the false notion of contemplation of Molinos (called "Quietism") according to whom the soul must abjure all activity of its own at all times. In the higher stages, passive contemplation may be marked by ecstasy (a prayerful "trance"), the "Spiritual Marriage", (a heavenly vision with external solemnization of the soul's special union with Jesus Christ, attended by saints and

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angels and celebrated with great splendor), as well as by visions, locutions, and the gift of miracles and prophecy. It is controverted whether this state of passive contemplation -- apart from the extraordinary phenomena that sometimes surround it -- is open to all, in the sense that it is an ordinary state that can be reached by cooperation with normal grace; or whether it is an extraordinary state reserved for a few chosen souls. This controversy does not affect the thesis. Margery claims to belong to the very highest circle of mystics in any case.

Upon examination, we found that Margery's description would indicate that she may have possessed active contemplation. She claimed more than that, but it cannot be verified from her book that she enjoyed passive contemplation or mysticism. There are difficulties that would persuade to the contrary. Her life does not reveal the presence of the "signs" that follow on this contemplation, signs summed up by the general term 'holiness of life'. Her humility and obedience are doubtful. She seems to evidence lack of that tranquility of soul that characterized the mystics, and she is repeatedly guilty of exaggerated conduct and imprudences that are not noted in the great mystics to whose privileges she lays claim. Her violent and noisy sobbing offers especial difficulty, and also some of the accidental mystical phenomena, especially her claim to absolution by St. John (which is hardly oral, yet

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should be) and her "Spiritual Marriage" (which is predicated of the Father and not the Son.) This contradicts mystic procedure and seems theologically unsound.

This would seem to indicate that Margery was not a mystic. Yet she does not give the impression of being a deliberate deceiver. Her book does not conceal her own faults and has an air of great candor and piety. The explanation of her remarkable career would seem to lie, therefore, in the assumption that she was not mentally normal. An attempt has been made to classify her as a paranoiac. But this does not explain all the facts, particularly since her "persecution" was not fancied but probably very real since her conduct aroused great comment and opposition. It seems more probable that her illness was Hysteria. This mental sickness is characterized by lack of balance, great suggestibility, hallucinations (sometimes), convulsive actions, including weeping, all of which are verified in Margery. We conclude therefore, that she was strongly neurotic, which a hysteria pattern. Her interest in mysticism and claims along that line are explained by her preoccupation with a troubled conscience that found relief in fancied visions and loud weeping and by her interest in contemporary mystics (St. Bridget of Sweden and Dame Julian of Norwich), and the mystic writings to which she was devoted. Her own life and her "Book" show striking similarities to the lives and revelations of other mystics that can be explained on the basis of suggestibility.

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There is corroboration for this view of Margery in the authority of Fr. Thurston, S.J., who strongly asserts her hysteria. This Jesuit priest had much experience along these line, so that his verdict is impressive.

This concludes our study of Margery. WE have had to reject her claims to "high contemplation" in the sense that she was a mystic. We do not proclaim her a deceiver, however, since her "Book" does not point inevitably to that, and her actions may be sufficiently explained by the supposition of Hysteria. But we do conclude, in any case, that a mystic Margery was not, and her alleged mysticism has not been verified as genuine by our investigation.

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